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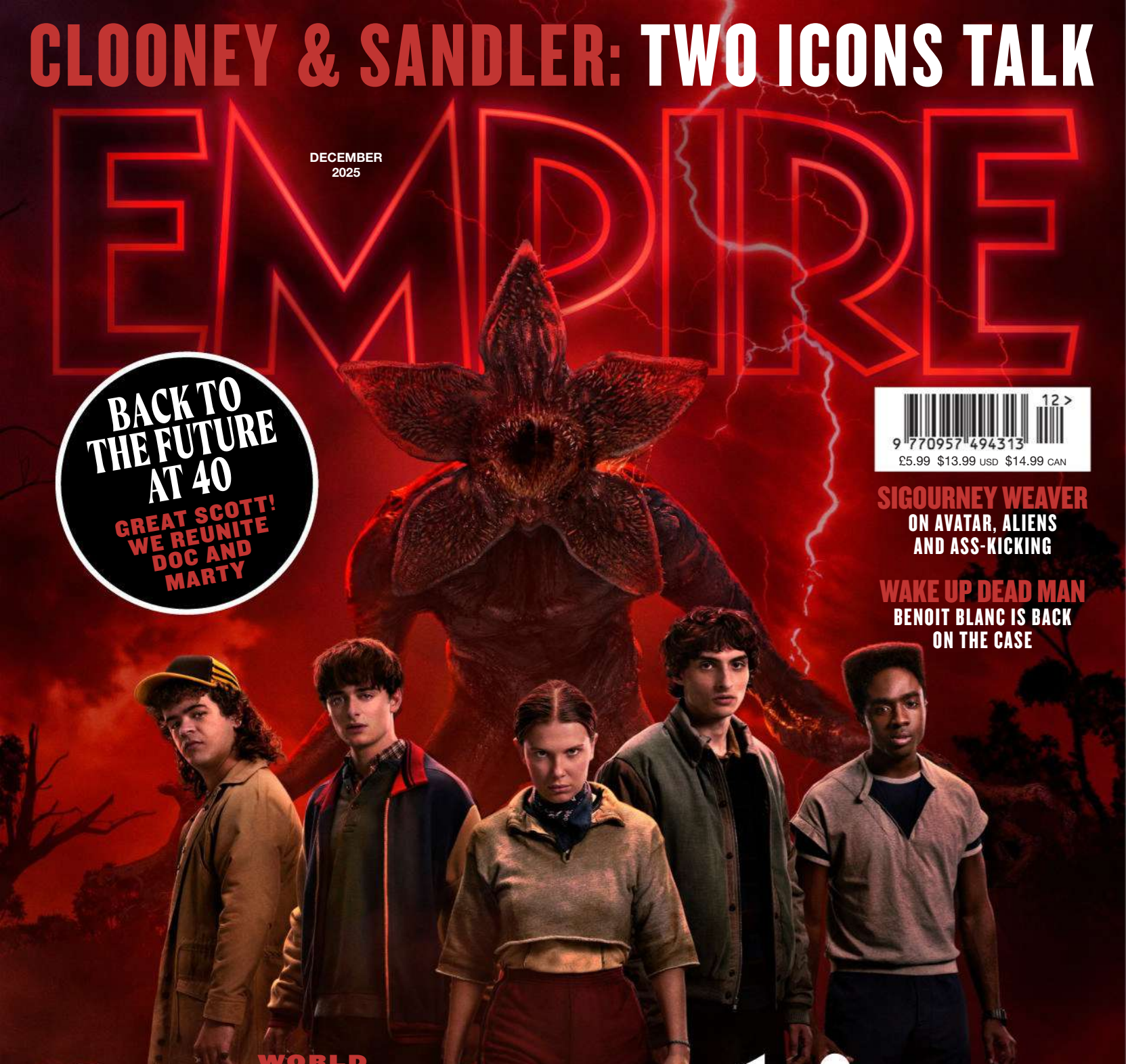

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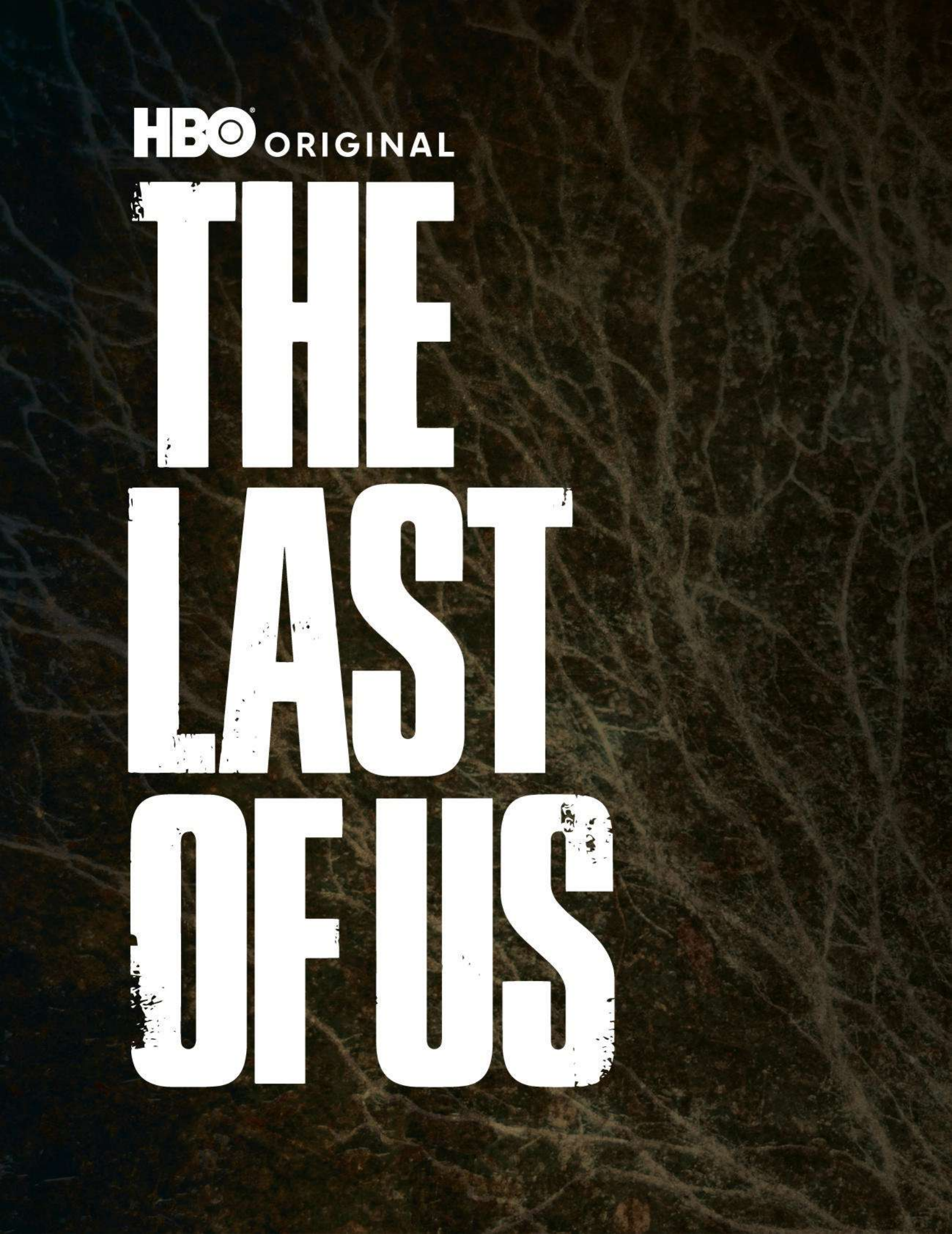
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Creative Director
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Editor-In-Chief (Digital)
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Features Editor
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BEN TRAVIS

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Social Media Editor
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News Editor
BETH WEBB

Editorial Assistant
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HELEN O'HARA

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Hayley Campbell, Ian Freer, Boyd Hilton, Dan Jolin, Bill McConkey, Ian Nathan, Christina Newland, Kim Newman, Nev Pierce, Paul Shipper, Adam Smith, Amon Warmann

CONTRIBUTORS
Words: Sophie Butcher, Matt Cabral, Becky Darke, Tom Ellen, Jamie Graham, Al Horner, Michael Jones, Matt Kamen, Jordan King, Michael Leader, David Lowery, Mike Muncer, Iana Murray, David Opie, Olly Richards, Mike Ryan, Lou Thomas, Laura Venning, Terri White
Photographers: Robert Ascroft, Marco Vittur
Illustrations: Arn0, Matthew Brazier, Bill McConkey, Russell Moorcroft, Greg Ruth, Aistė Stancikaitė
Design: Russell Moorcroft
Subbing: Julie Emery, Lucy Williams

PRODUCTION
Print Production Controller
Carl Lawrence 01733-468858
Ad Production Controller
Jackie Doran 01733-468107
ePublishing Production Director
Alan Kindell 020-7859 8604

ADVERTISING
Head Of Magazine Media
Clare Chamberlain
Head Of Magazine Brands
Anu Short
MD — Bauer Media Advertising
Simon Kilby
Commercial Director — Entertainment
Gemma Dick
Brand Director
Joel Stephan 020 3879 2125
Head Of Film
Sarah Clarke 020 7295 3576
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Katie Kendall 020 7295 8560
Media Planner
Ricky Duff 01733 648062
Head Of Classified
Imogen Jackaman 01733 459278
Inserts Manager
Simon Buckenham 020 7075 0812

MARKETING
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Sarah Norman
Marketing Manager
Zoe Blanchflower
Marketing Assistant
Sofie McIntyre

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"My knee looks like Christian Bale's face in that trailer."

Greg Ruth, Marco Vittur

EMPIRE
WELCOME

PUT ON SOME acid-washed denim and grab your nearest Boglin — this issue, we're going back to the '80s. In the case of our epic cover story: 1987, and the small town of Hawkins, Indiana. This is when and where the final season of Netflix phenomenon *Stranger Things* will unfold, pitting its intrepid band of heroes against the forces of darkness one last time.

Since launching in 2016, the show about a rift to another dimension known as the Upside Down has itself up-ended pop culture. It's gotten Kate Bush charting again, spawned TikTok memes and a major stage play, and even inspired Robert Downey Jr to dress up as Hopper for Halloween. And it's about to get bigger still. We sent Al Horner on his BMX to the show's LA edit suite, to find out from the Duffer brothers how they're going out with a bang. Al also spoke to the five young stars who have headed up the series since the start, for an emotional oral history of their rollercoaster ride. Read it all from page 48.

In *Stranger Things* Season 3, several characters catch a new flick called *Back To The Future* at the Hawkins mall. "I'm pretty sure that mom was trying to bang her son," says one later. "Wait, wait," says another. "The hot chick was Alex P. Keaton's mom?" That 1985 classic is now, somehow, 40 years old. So we asked Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd to talk to us about a friendship that has endured past, present and future. Great Scott: they said yes! The cockle-warming convo, moderated by Olly Richards, is a total

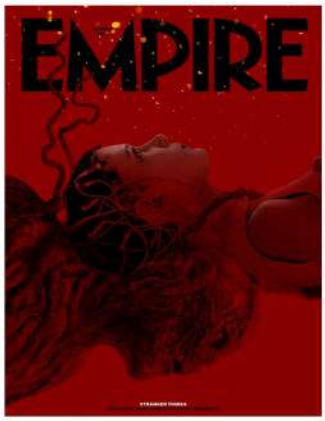
treat — find it on page 88 (mph).

And hey, we also have one George Clooney (star of '80s movie *Return Of The Killer Tomatoes*) and one Adam Sandler (star of '80s movie *Going Overboard*) chatting to each other too.

Enjoy the issue.

Nick

NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
@nickdesemlyen



SUBSCRIBER COVER

This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Greg Ruth
The author of graphic novels including *INDEH* (with Ethan Hawke), Greg has had a successful career in comics spanning over 30 years, making him the ideal choice for our *Stranger Things* cover. Go to gregthings.com to see more of his work.

TURN TO PAGE 106 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE SUBSCRIPTION*

* Please note that your first issue may not be the cover displayed

Empire, (ISSN 0957-4948, USPS 6398) is published every 4 Weeks by H Bauer Publishing Ltd, The Lantern, 75 Hampstead Road, London, NW1 2PL, United Kingdom. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Empire, World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Subscription records are maintained at Bauer Media, Subscriptions, CDS Global, Tower House, Sovereign Park, Lathkill Street, Market Harborough, Leicester LE16 9EF, United Kingdom. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.

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DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH

JOHN NUGENT HUNG OUT WITH CLOONEY AND SANDLER IN ITALY

"This was one of the most A-list hotel rooms I've ever been in. George and Adam were on great form when I met them at the Venice Film Festival, good-naturedly shooting the shit about their new film *Jay Kelly*. They didn't seem to mind that I look like a teenage son with my two dads."

ROBERT ASCROFT PHOTOGRAPHED SIGOURNEY WEAVER

"I was a little too young when *Alien* was released, but I saw it anyway. Sigourney Weaver's strong, complex characters have made her both a film legend and a hero of mine. Shooting on the *Avatar* stages was remarkable, but working with her made it unforgettable. She was kind, warm and effortlessly cool."

ALEX GODFREY INTERVIEWED JOACHIM RØNNING AT OUR *TRON: ARES* EVENT

"Joachim was on energetic form for our VIP event, in which we screened a good chunk of the film and then asked him to unpack it for us. The audience were on very good form too — thanks, especially, to one of you for the *magnificently* geeky question about motorbikes."

Russ Lemkin, Liam Norris/Still Moving, Spinelines issue 446. Newsstand: "A witch? What, like a good witch or a wicked witch? Like, a witch with a big nose and a broom?" is from *Mile 22*. Subs: "Oh, wicked wicked Zoot! She must pay the penalty!" is from *Monty Python And The Holy Grail*.

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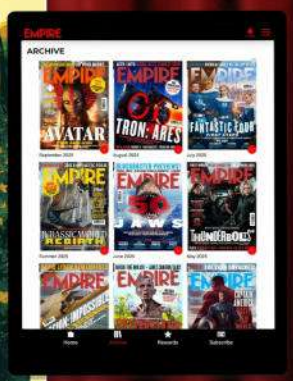

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EMPIRE COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH

MEN OF LETTERS

I thought it was about time I wrote to you to acknowledge my awesome friend Paul, who has subscribed to your amazing magazine for over 20 years now. The twist? He subscribes in my name so that I get to read each sacred edition while it is still in minty-fresh condition. I then post the much-thumbed copy to him along with an old-fashioned hand-written letter, which has helped maintain our friendship since 1987. He is a top friend and worthy of a shout-out.

IAN RUSSELL, VIA EMAIL

Lovely stuff all round. Maybe we should consider offering hand-written letters as part of the Empire VIP package. For your heartwarming act of friendship, Ian, have a Picturehouse membership on us. And shout-out to Paul!

Picturehouse *Empire*'s star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks.

ON *SPACEBALLS 2*:
You had me at Rick Moranis. Even if the movie turns out to be just him reading the phone book, I'm in.
DARREN SINGLETON

THANK EYWA/EMPIRE

I want to thank you for the '*Avatar*: Path To Pandora' series. It somehow made waiting for the film more bearable. As the series slowly comes to an end, I would love to encourage you to do something similar for upcoming biggest films. Could *Avengers: Doomsday* be next?

ONDRA NOVAK, VIA EMAIL

'Path To Pandora' has been a true labour of love. Next up: 'The Road To Angry Birds 3'.

ON *KILL BILL: THE WHOLE BLOODY AFFAIR*:
Reader, I have been waiting and waiting for this moment. Hopefully we get it here too.
@KYLESTEELE.BSKY.SOCIAL

EMPTY MY LOVE PUMP

Thanks for the interview with the legendary Spinal Tap ['Back For Elevenses', issue #444]. I enjoyed the sequel, though my scene as an extra was cut. I took a bus across Texas to be there and was so intent on holding my table in camera-view, I ordered coffee after coffee until I wet my pants! Truly a Stonehenge moment.

STEPHEN CONN, NEW MEXICO, USA

A charming if unfortunate anecdote, Stephen. Hope your washing machine goes to 11.

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:
WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE NON-HORROR SCARY MOVIE?

Watership Fucking *Down*! That film is pure traumatising nightmare fuel.
@WILLCHICH. BSKY.SOCIAL

Pinocchio. Lampwick turning into a donkey scared the bejesus out of me when I was little. It still freaks me out a bit now. I'm 52...
@THATFILMGEEK. BSKY.SOCIAL

The Empire Strikes Back. That nightmare vision in the middle was a lot when I was six.
@CRAIGOXBROW. BSKY.SOCIAL

Return To Oz, hands down. Saw it when I was five. Haunted me for MONTHS.
@MOONJAM.COM

Hey, you guys, it's *The Goonies*, because Sloth scared the living daylights out of me as a child!
@G-MAN07. BSKY.SOCIAL

WATCH OUT FOR THE NEXT QUESTION VIA OUR BLUESKY ACCOUNT: @EMPIREMAGAZINE.BSKY.SOCIAL

PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

MILLIE BOBBY BROWN PHOTOSHOOT JANUARY 2017

Nearly a decade ago, we celebrated *Stranger Things* just as it was exploding out of the Upside Down. As part of our Review Of The Year 2016, we set up a special shoot with breakout star Millie Bobby Brown, in the midst of her first whirlwind year in the spotlight.

Then just 12 years old, Brown was already an old hat at showbusiness, having recently performed at the Emmys — an engagement that she shrugged off. "I've never been shy of big crowds," she told us, also acknowledging that she had done several photoshoots already. A dab hand at dealing with journalists, the star refused to give up any future *Stranger Things* spoilers. "I don't know," she claimed. "Of course, I might know already — but then I'd have to kill you." Thankfully, no nosebleeds followed.

Alamy

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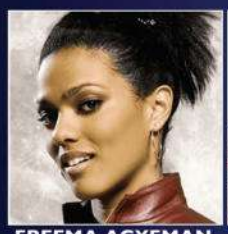

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NEW AMSTERDAM

TOBY JONES
HP, HUNGER GAMES, INDY
CAPT. AMERICA, DR WHO

NOAH SCHNAPP
STRANGER THINGS
BRIDGE OF SPIES

ALEC BALDWIN
BEETLEJUICE, MISSION IMPOSSIBLE
HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER

MATTHEW LEWIS
HARRY POTTER
MURDER BEFORE EVENSONG

ARTHUR DARVILL
LEGENDS OF TOMORROW
DOCTOR WHO

ADE EDMONDSON
YOUNG ONES, BOTTOM
ALIEN: EARTH

SAM JONES
FLASH GORDON, TED
STARGATE SG-1

BRIAN BLESSED
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STAR WARS, BLACKADDER

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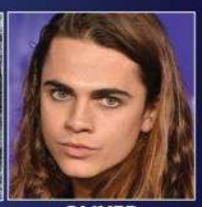

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WONDER WOMAN 84

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ALIENS

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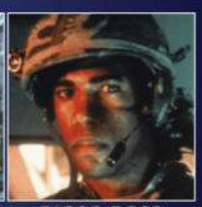

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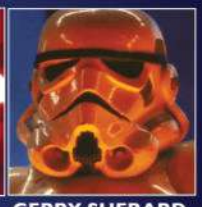

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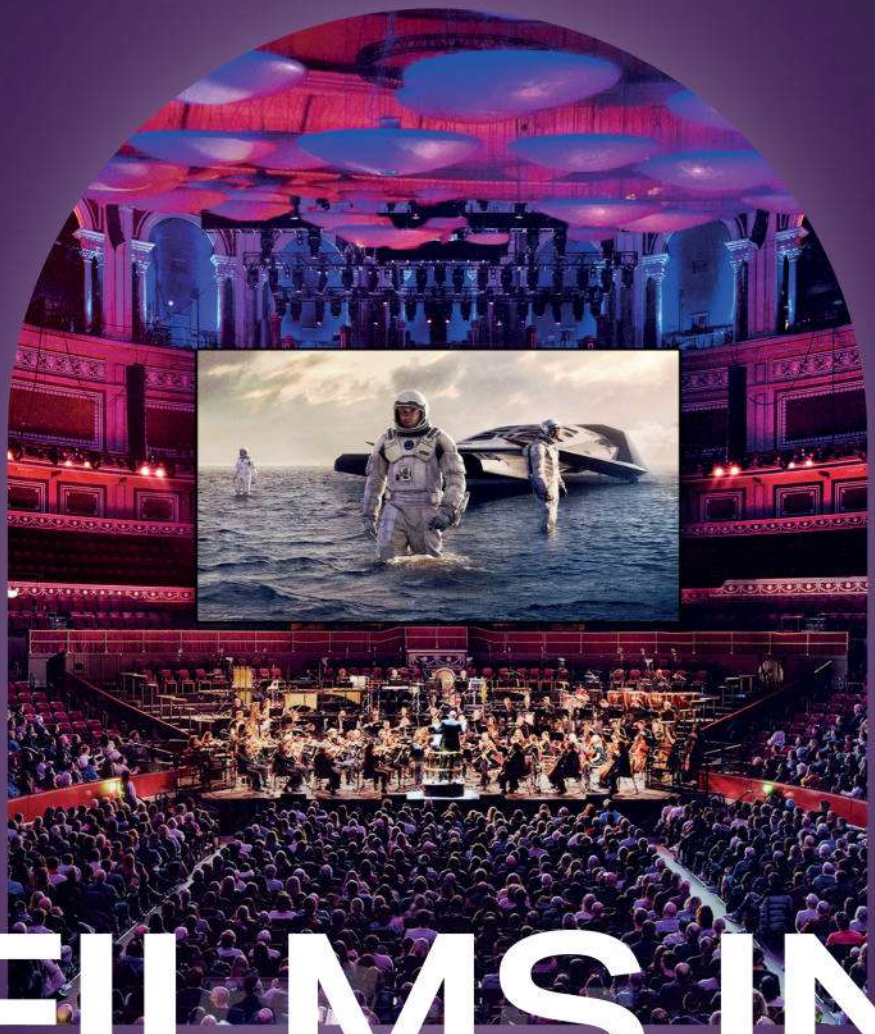

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The AI actor giving Hollywood the jitters

DIGITAL AVATAR TILLY NORWOOD IS BRINGING A DYSTOPIAN VISION TO THE RED CARPET

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

"A STAR IS digitised. You know what this means? We have stepped into a new dimension. Our ability to manufacture fraud now exceeds our ability to protect it." This is a line from Al Pacino's fictional director Viktor in the 2002 sci-fi satire *S1m0ne*. After his lead actor walks off a production, Viktor creates an AI replacement (played by Rachel Roberts), whose performance is so convincing that she becomes an Oscar-winning Hollywood sensation.

Twenty-three years later, we have stepped into that new dimension. Or have we? At the Zurich Film Festival in September, actor-turned-producer Eline Van der Velden introduced Tilly Norwood, whom she hailed as the first AI star. "We want Tilly to be the next Scarlett Johansson or Natalie Portman," she said. Norwood was created by Xicoia, the "AI talent" division of Van der Velden's production company Particle6. One of the primary aims of her creation is to help reduce production costs on projects. "Audiences? They care about the story — not whether the star has a pulse," Van der Velden wrote on LinkedIn. "The age of synthetic actors isn't 'coming' — it's here."

Just how worried should Hollywood be by this pulseless new performer? According to Norwood's creator, talent agents have expressed interest in representing her, which would be the first deal of its kind. An immediate backlash followed from the industry. "Good Lord, we're screwed," Emily Blunt declared during a press junket. "That is really, really scary. Come on, agencies, don't do that. Please stop. Please stop taking away our human connection." *Matilda* star Mara Wilson added on Instagram: "And what about the hundreds of living young women whose faces were composited together to make her? You couldn't hire any of them?"

A statement from acting union SAG-AFTRA followed shortly afterwards, saying that Norwood "has no life experience to draw from, no emotion and, from what we've seen, audiences aren't interested in watching computer-generated content untethered from the human experience".

At the time of writing, Norwood has not been signed by any agencies, but the groundwork has been laid. An Instagram account has been set up for her which includes a short showreel of AI-generated footage, featuring Norwood in fantasy-style armour in one shot, and delivering a few teary lines of dialogue from a period drama in another. "In 20 seconds I fought monsters, fled explosions, sold you a car, and nearly won an Oscar. All in a day's work... literally!" reads the caption.

Then there's Norwood's first role — in a short film called *AI Commissioner*. Made by Particle6, which has previously worked with the BBC, the two-minute comedy sketch takes a swing at the world of UK TV development while setting up Norwood's arrival as the next big thing. AI-generated characters describe her as "girl-next-door vibes" and "like if a Sunday roast went to drama school and got BAFTA-optimised", before Norwood appears briefly in a few scenes, crying on *The Graham Norton Show* and grinning on a red carpet. "I may be AI-generated, but I'm feeling very real emotions right now. I am so excited for what's coming next!" read the video caption on Norwood's Facebook page.

Alamy, Particle6 Productions

Clockwise from main: AI star Tilly Norwood; Lights, camera, AI; Al Pacino and Rachel Roberts in 2002's prescient *S1m0ne*.

For Kieran Vyas, an acting coach and filmmaker, what's coming next shouldn't be any cause for alarm. Yet. "It's a bit like *The Wizard Of Oz*," he says of Norwood's performance. "It's extremely impressive from the outside, but I haven't seen anything to suggest that we won't be disappointed if we look behind the curtain." This is partly because everything that we've seen of Norwood so far involves acting in isolation, without any co-stars to bounce off. "What makes a brilliant actor is the accuracy of their listening, their ability to be affected by another person, and their ability to recognise human behaviour and respond with specificity," he summarises.

So when should the panicking start? When Tilly gets a screen partner? Vyas has had a front-row seat to watching actors lose out to crucial commercial work as AI encroaches further on the industry. However, while he is anticipating technology advancing to the stage where two characters are able to interact with each other, he'll wait to see what that actually looks like. We may not be at the point where our ability to manufacture fraud exceeds our ability to protect it just yet.

But Particle6 is making strides to get there. Xicoia's aim is to create evolved ways for Norwood's avatar to interact with people, engaging in unscripted conversations and responding to trends in real time. Though driven by AI, there is human involvement helping her to function in acting scenarios.

Van der Velden has responded to the backlash with a different tune. "I see AI not as a replacement for people, but as a new tool — a new paintbrush," she posted on Norwood's Instagram. "I'm an actor myself, and nothing — certainly not an AI character — can take away the craft or joy of human performance."

This may all have been an elaborate stunt for Particle6, one that has shoehorned the company into the spotlight amid the ongoing battle between Hollywood and AI. Perhaps the Wizard may get better at playing with smoke and mirrors, while behind the scenes things remain underwhelming. But with an AI actor now part of a global conversation, *S1m0ne* feels like less of a stretch than ever. And the Oscar goes to...

Method in the sadness

CHLOÉ ZHAO RETURNS TO THE OSCAR RACE WITH MOVING SHAKESPEARE DRAMA HAMNET

WORDS **IANA MURRAY**

BRACE YOURSELF FOR one of the awards season's heaviest hitters. Chloé Zhao's *Hamnet* is an experience you need to be prepared for — so much so that the filmmaker has been leading festival audiences through meditative breathing exercises before screenings. Based on the novel by Maggie O'Farrell, the latest film from the *Nomadland* and *Eternals* director follows William Shakespeare (Paul Mescal) and his wife Agnes (Jessie Buckley) as their relationship fractures in the wake of an unbearable loss that inspires the playwright's magnum opus. Cue the tears. Zhao speaks to *Empire* about her weepy epic.

TO BE, OR NOT TO BE

With the film taking place almost entirely from Agnes' point of view, we first see her meet William, the pair hiding from her overbearing family as they quickly fall for each other. That courtship is bolstered by fizzling chemistry between Mescal and Buckley, who depict lovers going through both euphoric highs and profound lows. "It's like you have the deepest, darkest winter that makes the soil ready for the brightest, most glorious summer," Zhao explains. "We definitely wanted that contrast to show that, even though they suffer, they keep their hearts open."

GOODNIGHT, SWEET PRINCE

Agnes and William's world collapses when their son Hamnet (Jacobi Jupe) passes away from a sudden illness. While the playwright disappears off to London to channel his pain into theatre, his wife is left alone to pick up the pieces. When Zhao approached adapting the source material with author O'Farrell, the core idea that she wanted to

Clockwise from main: Shakespeare in love: Paul Mescal as the Bard, with Jessie Buckley as Agnes; Alone in a crowd; The playwright couldn't see the wood for the trees; Director Chloé Zhao on set.

translate to the screen was the power of art in confronting and understanding grief. "We're constantly making compost out of our life experiences into something else," the director explains. Above all, grief is a transformational journey. "If I were to sum up the film in one word, it is about metamorphosis."

THE PLAY'S THE THING

When it came to casting Hamnet's surrogate, Hamlet, for the debut performance of the play, which takes place late in the film, Zhao says finding the right actor was a combined effort from herself and Mescal, who wanted "someone with the kind of presence that is hard to explain, someone who's both a man and a boy". Producer Nicolas Gonda suggested Jupe's older brother Noah (*Ford V Ferrari*). "I went to his mom and I said, 'I'm looking for Hamlet,'" Zhao recalls. "She literally screams. 'Let me call him right now!'" That happy coincidence lent itself to a deeper, unspoken link between both characters — who are really one and the same. "Once you surrender, the universe starts to take care of things for you," Zhao adds. "It was amazing, he's never done Shakespeare before." The Bard couldn't have written it better.

SING THEE TO THY REST

Zhao enlisted famed composer Max Richter to create the film's haunting music, itself a spectre that hangs around the characters. "Whoever is doing the score needs to think of this as almost a spiritual vibration that could stay alongside nature," she explains. "There are few out there that can do as well as Max Richter when it comes to this specific quality." Obviously, a movie set in 17th-century Britain doesn't need a needle drop, but *Hamnet* does culminate with one familiar cue: Richter's 'On The Nature Of Daylight', a melancholic, slow-building chorus of strings that has reduced every viewer of *Shutter Island* and *The Last Of Us* to tears. Zhao had only heard the track in *Arrival* before Buckley introduced it to her, at a pivotal time when the director was struggling to figure out an ending. "Listening to that song, I found myself reaching my hand out of the car window, when it was raining outside, and I had the whole ending in my head." In the case of *Hamnet*, the rest *isn't* silence.

***HAMNET* IS IN CINEMAS FROM JANUARY 9**

Getty Images, Marco Vittur

THE PLATFORM

"Owen Cooper is just one example of how high someone can fly if given a chance"

SOPHIE BUTCHER ON *ADOLESCENCE*'S EMMY WINS AND WORKING-CLASS CREATIVES

"THIS KIND OF thing doesn't normally happen to a kid like me." The first line of Stephen Graham's Emmy speech, as he won an award for his lead performance in *Adolescence*, articulates a feeling familiar to anyone from a working-class background with a dream of working in film and TV. It's a certain kind of imposter syndrome that comes from moving into an industry filled with people with whom you have little common ground, whether that's in regards to your upbringing, education, or simply your accent. It's an inner voice that, no matter how successful you get, never quite stops whispering: "You don't belong here."

This feeling doesn't come from nowhere — in 2024, research by UK social-mobility charity The Sutton Trust showed that adults from working-class backgrounds are four times less likely to work in creative industries compared to their middle-class peers; 31 per cent of elite figures in TV, film and music attended a private school; and that BAFTA-nominated actors are five times more likely to have been privately educated.

Such drastic underrepresentation is a huge issue. The stories we see told on screen help us understand ourselves, our place in the world, and what's possible. If the majority of people in charge of those stories have a privileged perspective, our entire cultural lens becomes skewed. And if aspiring working-class creatives never see anyone they can relate to getting to the very top of their field, it becomes almost impossible to believe that it could happen for them.

A self-described "mixed-race kid from a block of flats in a place called Kirby", Graham is — and has been — putting in the hours to improve things. With projects like *Adolescence* and his work with Shane Meadows, he has been at the forefront of depicting a diverse range of working-class stories. When casting his character's son in *Adolescence*, Graham and his team spent months scouring northern England to find an unknown talent for the role, with Owen Cooper eventually landing it. Giving a powerhouse performance in his very first professional acting job, Cooper also bagged an Emmy aged just 15: one example of how high someone can fly if given a chance that would have otherwise been closed off to them.

But improving those statistics will require commitment from the industry at large — more access initiatives and outreach programmes, green-lighting projects from working-class talent, less forced reliance on unpaid work to get your foot in the door — as well as governments, who must ensure quality arts education is available to those from all socio-economic backgrounds. If we take action now, we can show more working-class kids that, as Cooper said in his emotional Emmy speech, "Anything can be possible."

Vaulting to the next level

EMPIRE GOES ON SET FOR SEASON 2 OF STREAMING SENSATION FALLOUT

WORDS **AMON WARMANN**

WHEN THE FIRST season of post-apocalyptic series *Fallout* landed on Prime Video in 2024, its impact was nuclear. Based on the cult video-game franchise — which sees a group of vastly different characters navigate a dystopian world 200 years after an atomic armageddon — the show earned 65 million viewers in its first 16 days, 16 Emmy nominations, and became Prime's second-most-watched title in history.

For executive producer Jonathan Nolan (who co-created *Westworld*), this success wasn't a complete surprise. "It's uniquely gonzo, ambitious, hilarious, dark, and there's nothing quite like it in the gaming space," he tells *Empire*. "Which is why we felt there would be nothing quite like it on TV."

Walton Goggins, who plays mutated outlaw the Ghoul, believes the show's success is partly due to the timeliness of its existential themes. "All of us took it as a sign [that] we've tapped into something," he reflects. "It just so happens to coincide with all this anxiety the world is feeling at this moment." Whatever the reason, just a week after the first season hit screens, a second was confirmed.

Cut to February 2025, and *Empire* is standing on set watching it come to life, in a dusty landscape that could be mistaken for Las Vegas. But this is far from the glitz and glamour of the real Sin City. For starters, there's a zombie-like figure in full Elvis Presley garb in our eyeline.

Filmed on location at Valley Plaza in North Hollywood, Los Angeles, this is one of the vast new backdrops that contribute to *Fallout*'s bolder, bigger sophomore season. Amid the sandy destruction, we witness the Ghoul and peppy human Lucy (Ella Purnell) at the gates of New Vegas, territory of the Kings faction (a gang of Presley impersonators) and a major new setting for the series. As the Ghoul looks on, a gun-toting Lucy casually shoots mutant Elvis. Once again, the King is dead. "In this moment,

THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

BEHEMOTH!

Pedro Pascal, who clearly hasn't been working hard enough lately, has signed on to his next project: he'll star in Tony Gilroy's *Andor* follow-up, alongside David Harbour. Scant details are available, except that it is a drama which "revolves around a cellist", according to Gilroy.

CUT OFF

In her first lead film role since *Barb And Star Go To Vista Del Mar*, **Kristen Wiig** will join Jonah Hill for his next directorial effort (Hill also co-writing and producing). The pair play wealthy siblings who are financially cut off by their parents, played by screen legends Bette Midler and Nathan Lane.

VERY YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN

At the ripe old age of 99, Mel Brooks is still booked and busy: *Spaceballs 2* is currently filming, and he is executive-producing this TV spin-off of his beloved horror parody. **Zach Galifianakis** leads a cast that includes Cary Elwes and Kumail Nanjiani.

we are giving Lucy her first V.A.T.S. shot, where time freezes," explains co-showrunner Graham Wagner between takes — referring to the 'Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System' seen in the game, which allows the shooter to slow down time. "We keep pushing her as she gradually acclimatises to the wild, wild west of the Wasteland."

The Ghoul (a former Hollywood star called Cooper Howard) and Lucy are two of the show's three core characters, alongside Maximus (Aaron Moten), a member of the mech-suit-clad paramilitary organisation, the Brotherhood of Steel. Each has their own goals, their journeys dovetailing with each other as they make their way through the Wasteland setting.

All three have new demons to face in Season 2. Maximus has risen through the ranks of the Brotherhood, but not without sacrifice. "He's finally been knighted, but it's a 'be careful what you wish for' sense of feeling for [him]," says Moten. Meanwhile, the Ghoul comes face-to-face with Justin Theroux's Mr House, a technocrat who knew him as Cooper and now rules over New Vegas. Their relationship — which begins in a period previously unexplored in the show or games — adds a new layer to the story. "We have a couple of really incredible scenes that are just these big, heavyweight bouts of intellect," Theroux recalls. "It was like doing *Waiting For Godot* in the middle of the whole thing."

Clockwise from main: Apocalyptic action! Walton Goggins' Ghoul has been busy; Mr House (Justin Theroux), deep in thought; A pensive Lucy (Ella Purnell); Maximus (Aaron Moten) levels up.

There are actual demon-esque monsters to deal with this time around, too: the Deathclaws. These giant, reptilian-style beasts are the apex predators of the *Fallout* universe, and it took four puppeteers — along with some digital wizardry from ILM — to bring each of the foes to life. "We do things practically whenever possible," says co-showrunner Geneva Robertson-Dworet. "We want things to be tactile and tangible. It was only by using puppets, that are quite scary when you see them in person, that things feel deeply real." This approach had the desired impact on the cast. "I'm excited about being scared," says Goggins.

Perhaps the most intriguing new element of *Fallout*'s second season is the evolving relationship between Lucy and the Ghoul. Lucy started the series as a Vault dweller, blissfully ignorant of the outside world, with her first tour of the Wasteland denting her good-hearted nature. Now, she's paired up with an amoral pessimist in the Ghoul. As they trudge from Los Angeles to New Vegas through a landscape full of dodgy characters — she looking for her father (Kyle MacLachlan), whose betrayal was revealed at the end of Season 1, and he looking for House, who may have answers on where his family is — her moral core will be tested further. "At times, it's like [they] are on this buddy road trip," Purnell says. "And then other times, they're so much at arms. They're trying to influence each other and see who's going to rub off on whom. Is the Ghoul going to become good? Is Lucy going to become bad? Or are they going to be somewhere in the middle?" With new factions, new locations, and new, dangerous threats to contend with, all bets are off.

***FALLOUT* SEASON 2 IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM DECEMBER 17**

SWEETSICK

Cate Blanchett will star in this directorial debut from Alice Birch, a British playwright and screenwriter (*Lady Macbeth*, *Normal People*, *Succession*). Blanchett will play a woman with a mysterious gift: the ability to see what people most intimately need. We most need to see this film.

WHAT HAPPENS AT NIGHT

Do look up! *Don't Look Up* duo **Leonardo DiCaprio** and Jennifer Lawrence are reuniting for Martin Scorsese's new film, the director having finally found his next project: an adaptation of Peter Cameron's 2023 horror novel.

SLIME

Teyana Taylor is making huge waves with her revolutionary role in *One Battle After Another*. Now the rapper-actor has found her follow-up: she joins John Boyega and Willow Smith in lending her voice to this animated sci-fi film, about a girl injected with mysterious slime.

JONTY

Peep Show writers Jesse Armstrong and Sam Bain have reunited to co-write this original film for A24. *Hustlers* helmer Lorene Scafaria will direct **Jesse Plemons** and newly minted Tony winner Cole Escola. Plot details are scarce, but it's safe to assume it will be funny, sweary and bleak.

THE OFF WEEKS

Having finally directed the hell out of *Severance*'s second season, Ben Stiller returns to Apple TV+ with **Jessica Chastain** for this limited series. Stiller will play a divorced professor whose life is thrown into chaos when he falls in love with a mysterious woman (Chastain).

Getty Images

Sydney Sweeney's big swing

THE ACTOR GIVES US A BLOW-BY-BLOW OF BOXING BIOPIC CHRISTY

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

SHE'S PLAYED A spider-woman (*Madame Web*), a pregnant nun (*Immaculate*), and a member of the Manson family (*Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood*). But with *Christy*, about the life of pioneering female boxer and domestic-abuse survivor Christy Martin, Sydney Sweeney is taking on her most transformative role yet. Here, she talks *Empire* through the stages of bringing Martin's story to the screen.

ROUND 1: HITTING THE GYM

As well as watching Martin's old fights, reading her memoir and spending time with her, Sweeney committed to matching her physicality. "I had three months of training and worked out every day," she recalls. "An hour of weight training in the morning and night, and boxing for three to four hours. I felt so strong." To really get in the zone, she took inspiration from one of cinema's most famous fighters. "I built my own version of a *Rocky* gym in my grandma's garage," she says. "I had a floor ring, and bags hanging, and painted the walls with chalkboard paint. I felt like I was actually going for a real fight."

ROUND 2: IN THE RING

During filming, the boxing matches were the biggest technical challenge. "Every fight is an exact replica of one of Christy's," Sweeney says. "We were learning them precisely, watching videos and choreography and making sure my technique and combos were the same as hers." Though they were tough, the fights were also Sweeney's favourite scenes to shoot. "Any time I was in the ring, I felt like I just came to life as Christy," she explains. "I never wanted to leave."

Clockwise from main: Boxing clever: Sydney Sweeney as prizefighter Christy Martin; The actor's favourite scenes were the fights; On the ropes with director David Michôd.

ROUND 3: NO HOLDS BARRED

Martin was on set often — but her seeing the film for the first time was still nerve-racking for Sweeney. "She called me right away," the actor says. "She was like, 'How did you know I did those things? You had to have been there when I was growing up!'" Boxing aside, *Christy* tackles some dark themes, including Martin's experiences of homophobia, and her violent relationship with manager-turned-husband Jim (Ben Foster). Being responsible for this kind of real-life story is something Sweeney doesn't take lightly. "It's all the right kind of pressure," she says, "because I knew what we were about to give the world was a lot of weight on my shoulders. But it was also an honour." Steel yourselves — like Martin herself, *Christy* doesn't pull any punches.

***CHRISTY* IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 28**

Getty Images

THE MVP

MEET OUR HERO OF THE MONTH

TAMARA DEVERELL

PRODUCTION DESIGNER FOR *FRANKENSTEIN*

How did you plough a fresh furrow on *Frankenstein*?
I watched some of the older movies, and looked at some stills. I reread, obviously, Mary Shelley's novel, which was very inspiring. And Guillermo [del Toro, director] is very good, because he'll often do concept illustrations. And then I put that aside, because I have to develop my own sense of what this world is.

Guillermo has had this movie in his head for ages. How do you work in tandem with that?
He gives a few directives at the beginning, and expects you to really immerse yourself in the script that he's handed you. Then, it's more of a visual language. We'll sit and look at visuals together, and draw together. It's not just words. Words aren't enough for us to communicate; it's visuals. That's where we meet.

Tell us about building Victor's lab.
Guillermo honed in on it [being] a water tower on the edge of a cliff. We were scouting in Scotland and looking at different architectural monuments — the Wallace Tower, for example [in Aberdeen] — and taking elements from those. He always wanted the large Medusa head. He's a go-big-or-go-home kind of person, so it's enormous. I think it was 16 feet across. Everything was done by hand on this movie.

How did it feel, seeing your creation come to life? Did you shout, "It's alive!"?
Every step that was built, I felt like that. I felt like Dr Frankenstein. **CHRIS HEWITT**

***FRANKENSTEIN* IS IN CINEMAS NOW AND ON NETFLIX FROM NOVEMBER 7**

THE WEBSITE MONITORING CANINE CATASTROPHE

HOW DOES THE DOG DIE? TRACKS TRIGGER WARNINGS IN *GOOD BOY* AND BEYOND

WHEN THE TRAILER for haunted-house movie *Good Boy* dropped this summer, internet searches for "Does the dog die?" soared by 2,000 per cent. That's because every frame of the film either features or is shot from the point of view of Indy, an impossibly cute Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever whose keen eyes, ears and big, wet nose can sense sinister paranormal activity.

One website that naturally benefitted from the search spike was DoesTheDogDie.com, launched in 2011 by John Whipple. "Oh yeah, it totally blew up my numbers," says the Texan software developer, giving the sense that if he had a tail it would be wagging vigorously. "I've had tons of extra visitors. *John Wick* has the biggest numbers, but it's over a long time. In terms of viral takeover, *Good Boy* is the one."

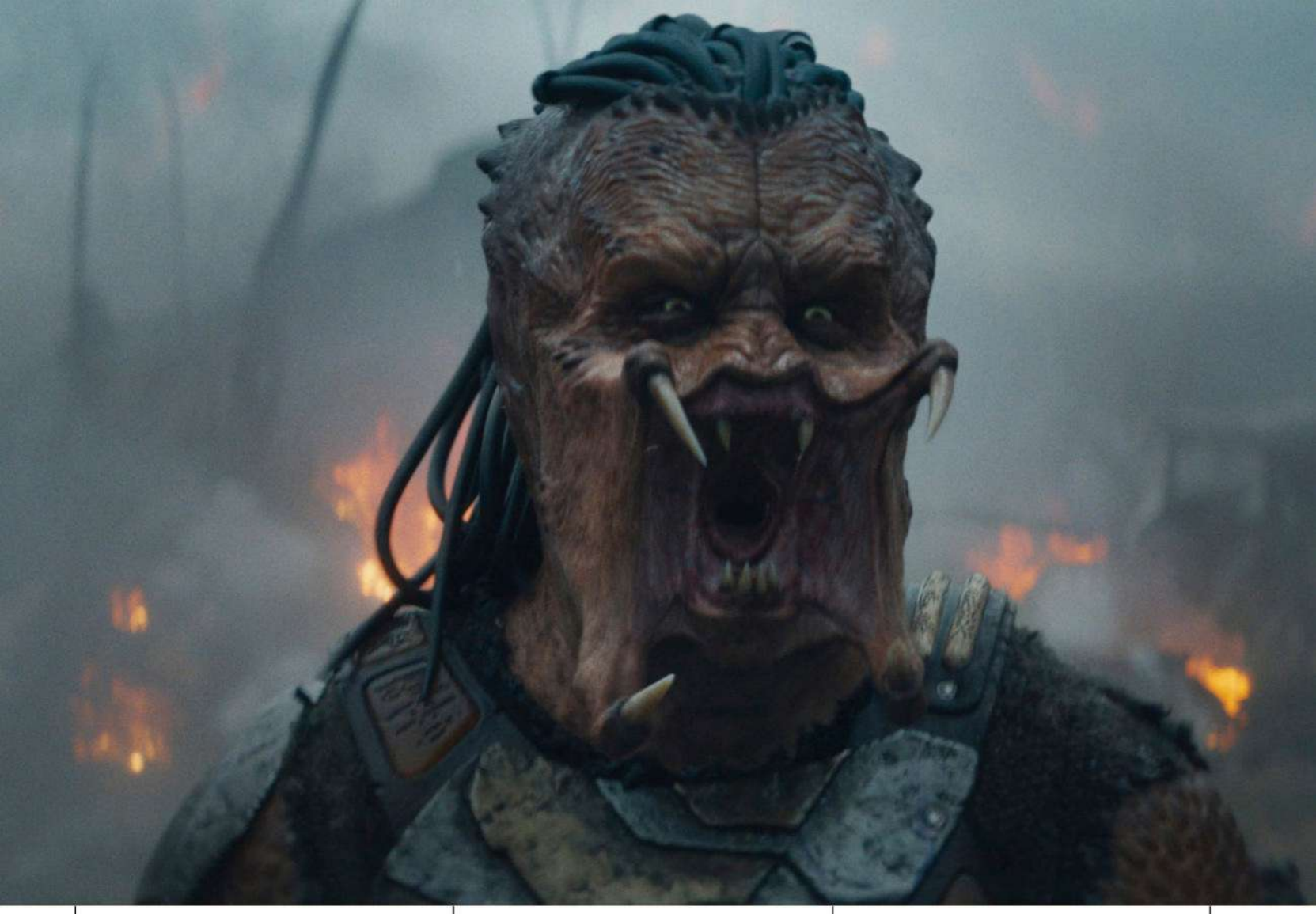
When the site launched, it was simply Whipple and a mate watching movies and posting subsequent trigger warnings for the benefit of mutt-loving viewers. Now the site is crowdsourced and features a long list of trigger warnings, such as "Is there addiction?", "Is someone gaslighted?" and "Is there domestic violence?" Anyone can log in to answer "Yes" or "No" to the questions and leave one comment, while trolls are weeded out by others downloading the spam remark, until it disappears altogether.

Top: Dog day afternoon: *Good Boy*'s Indy. **Above:** Keanu Reeves' John Wick having a ruff time.

The site's expansion, says Whipple, occurred organically: "Someone reported that this cat dies in another film, so we started tracking that. Then it went to horses. Then somebody asked, 'Are there any depictions of pregnancy?' And once it left just animals, we started adding triggers for pretty much anything that people wanted."

Which includes, "Does the dragon die?" A fair-enough question, as anyone who has watched *Game Of Thrones* or *Pete's Dragon* will testify. But this went beyond. "This person was convinced they had a dragon as a pet when they were younger, and seeing dragons die really affected them," says Whipple. "Everyone has a trigger. For that guy it was dragons."

For the majority, though, it is dogs. As Whipple points out, even hardened horror hounds draw the line at watching a canine snuffle off this mortal coil. **JAMIE GRAHAM**



How to craft an alien tongue

AS *PREDATOR: BADLANDS* SHOWCASES A NEW LANGUAGE, *EMPIRE* DELVES INTO THE WEIRD WORLD OF 'CONLANGS'

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

IF YOU THOUGHT choosing between "tu" and "vous" in French was a linguistic minefield, wait until you have to make small talk with a Predator.

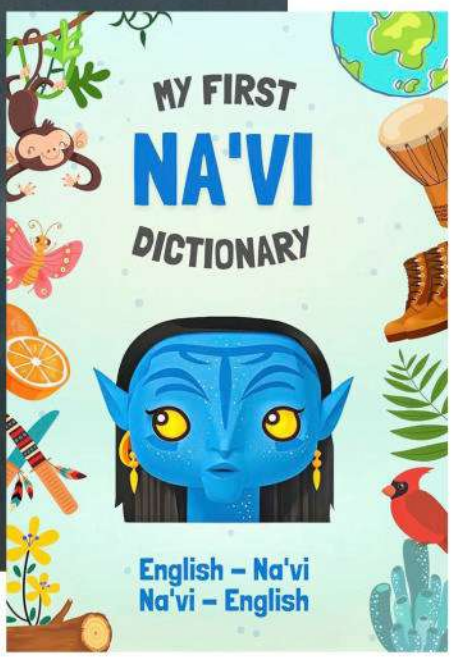
"The creatures have various words for 'you'," says Britton Watkins, the man who created the dreadlocked aliens' language, Yautja. "If you're talking to someone you don't think much of, you use 'wol', which is *not* polite. But if it's familiar, you're speaking to your bro, it's 'kai'. And if you're talking *up* to somebody you respect, you say 'thau'. Once you lock into those paradigms, it's a pretty easy language to learn."

Constructed languages (known as 'conlangs') have been a feature of sci-fi/fantasy film and TV for decades, from *Star Trek*'s Klingon to *Game Of Thrones*' Dothraki. But 2025 has been something of a conlang boom year — seeing not only the return of the Na'vi tongue in *Avatar: Fire And Ash*, but also the unveiling of new *Star Wars* language Ghorman in Andor's second season, as well as Watkins' Yautja in *Predator: Killer Of Killers* and next month's *Predator: Badlands*. While Ghorman's creator, Marina Tyndall, has said that her language shares "85 per cent of the phonology of French", Watkins was keen that Yautja "should not resemble any existing human language". Largely because Predators, he points out, "don't have lips. At all. They can't make 'buh', 'puh' or 'muh' sounds. So, much of the language comes from the throat: deep, grumbly sounds. No-one expects a big, monstrous character to sound like a titmouse."

The creation of an entirely new, alien language is, as you might expect, a momentous undertaking. For Watkins — previously a Klingon consultant on *Star Trek* films — the process of inventing Yautja began with re-watching the previous *Predator* movies to see if there was anything to work with. "There are scenes where the creatures grunt at each other," he grins. "But I couldn't pick anything out of that. Plus, Dan [Trachtenberg, *Badlands*' director] insisted this film would have expressiveness and poignant moments, so it couldn't all be 'grrr, grrr'. He wanted a language suited to these fight-and-hunt-focused creatures, which could also work in quiet, heart-to-heart scenes."

Initially working from 160 lines of dialogue from Trachtenberg, Watkins began crafting the new tongue. "A lot of it is intuition," he tells *Empire*. "For the Yautja verb 'to be' I chose 'hurrr', with that rolling 'r' at the back of the throat, which is evocative of the growling sound Predators traditionally make. I wanted the words to feel unusual and 'alien' to English speakers. The Yautja word for 'I' — 'chish' — is very distinct from the English. The Yautja word for 'no' is 'ngi'; in English we generally have 'ng' at the end of words, rather than the start." Gradually, Watkins built up a spreadsheet of 1,000 words, cross-referencing constantly to

Clockwise from main: Predator Dek (Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi); Learn the language of the *Avatar* universe; Dek makes a point in Yautja.



ensure consistency ("The words for 'no', 'nothing' and 'no-one' all have the same root," he explains).

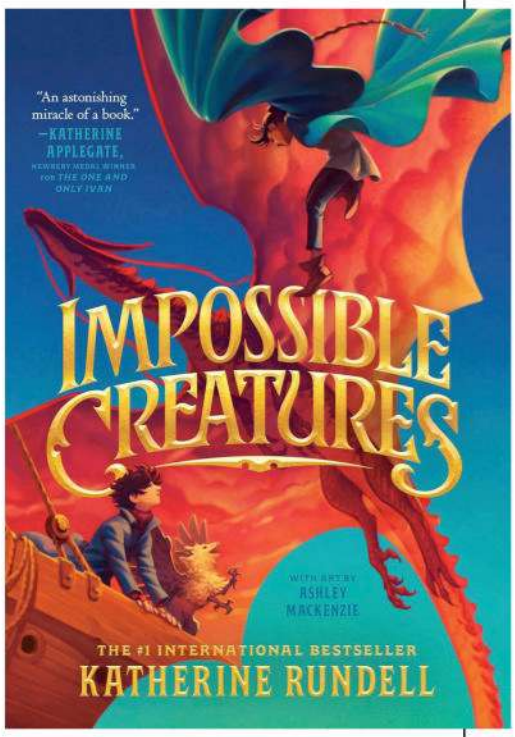
At present, only Watkins and Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi (who plays *Badlands*' Predator, Dek) have a decent grasp of Yautja. That may change on the film's release. "Some fans are highly motivated," laughs Watkins. "They get out their notebooks and become field linguists. Yautja is not exactly a musical language, but it's absolutely learnable. I'd love to teach it someday."

Could 'Yautja 101' be coming to a campus near you soon? Watkins certainly wouldn't say 'ngi'.

***PREDATOR: BADLANDS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 7**

Getty Images

GIVING HARRY A RUN FOR HIS MONEY


"An astonishing miracle of a book."
—KATHERINE APPLEGATE,
NEWBERY MEDAL WINNER FOR THE ONE AND ONLY IVAN
IMPOSSIBLE CREATURES
WITH ART BY ASHLEY MACKENZIE
THE #1 INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER
KATHERINE RUNDELL

DISNEY HAS WON THE RIGHTS TO THE IMPOSSIBLE CREATURES BOOKS. HERE'S WHAT WE COULD EXPECT

A MAGICAL WORLD!

The first instalment of the five-part children's series from British author Katherine Rundell (pictured below) introduces the archipelago of Gilmouria, a cluster of unmapped islands. Discovered by human boy Christopher while visiting his grandfather in Scotland, the 34 islands — which lie somewhere between Greenland and Nova Scotia — have existed for thousands of years. With Rundell's two published novels being compared to the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and Philip Pullman, prepare to wrap your head around some deep geographical lore in these movies.

MYTHICAL CREATURES!

Griffins! Unicorns! Centaurs! Dragons! All could feature in the films, as they roam freely in Gilmouria. Expect lesser-known beasts as well, including vegetable lambs of Tartary (animal plants that, yep, grow sheep) and longma (winged horses with dragon scales). The first film will see the islands' inhabitants in grave danger from a mysterious rising evil, which Christopher and a native girl, Mal, who possesses a flying coat, must take on. Could Disney go down the CGI route, in a similar way to *Percy Jackson And The Olympians*, with these fantastical fauna? Or will some puppetry come into play?

ENCHANTED BEINGS!

Along with Mal, other non-beasts reside across the archipelago. In second book *The Poisoned King*, for example — which, like its predecessor, will be adapted by Rundell into a screenplay — we meet Princess Anya Argen and her complicated dynasty. With *Impossible Creatures* already being described as Disney's answer to the *Harry Potter* franchise, we may be looking at a new generation's Harry and Hermione in these courageous kids.

LOTS MORE CREATURES!

Rundell had originally intended for her novels to be a trilogy, but after the first book proved such a hit, the series was extended to five in 2024. Now, with the existing two books having sold over four million copies worldwide, and with the author being the first since J.K. Rowling to top the US and UK charts simultaneously with *The Poisoned King*, Rundell is in talks to expand even further with potential spin-offs and sequels. Could this mean more movies with Disney and her own production company, Impossible Films? Could Disney theme-park attractions follow suit, plus the chance to own your own sheep-plant plushie? Anything seems Impossible. **BETH WEBB**

A movie monument to lost souls

JULIA DUCOURNAU STRIVES TO FIND HUMANITY IN THE DARKNESS OF EPIDEMIC DRAMA ALPHA

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

JULIA DUCOURNAU'S PROTAGONISTS, in 2016's cannibalism drama *Raw* and 2021's transhumanist shocker *Titane*, steadily but surely shake off the shackles of convention — as does the director. Her taboo-trampling films, acutely physical studies of transformation and emancipation, seem to be born kicking and screaming, Ducournau raging at the world. Her latest, *Alpha*, is a quieter, sadder study, but no less impassioned.

See-sawing between the 1980s and '90s, it examines the effects of an epidemic (AIDS is not namechecked but is clearly the inspiration) as it destroys lives, but more significantly exposes a sickness in society. After getting tattooed via a dirty needle at a party, Mélissa Boros' 13-year-old Alpha quickly becomes an outcast, while her relationship with her mother (Golshifteh Farahani) reaches breaking point.

"It's a project that I've had in mind for a long time," Ducournau tells *Empire*. She wanted to write a family drama about trauma, and found it tough going, as doing so involved a lot of self-examination, and facing up to the idea that "we've got to prepare ourselves to be in a world with no parents, and a world where the safe place, the womb, doesn't exist anymore". Covid played into it, she says, but also, "The world is taking a turn that nobody expected, a dark turn. And we have to try to accept this motherless world. Unfortunately." It's not light fare.

The shoot was similarly heavy. "Everyone had something to purge and to forgive through the film, which led to a very, very emotional set," she explains. "Many times, we were all crying during some takes." And the intimacy of the material was a lot to wrangle. One particularly intense scene between Farahani, who plays a doctor, and Tahar Rahim, as her decaying, dying brother Amin, pushed Ducournau to her limits. "There was almost an existential questioning happening on every take, changing angles, changing lines, to try to capture this moment of sheer humanity they were giving me. That was much more of — sorry for this word — a brainfuck than directing a five-minute oner with 400 extras and a crane, like I did in *Titane*."

Alpha is a deeply compassionate film, mourning those lost to the disease, the dead turning into marble. In that regard it's reminiscent of *28 Years Later*, in which Ralph Fiennes' Dr Kelson pays respect to those we've lost, and builds a monument — a bone temple — to them. "And also makes them beautiful, makes them art," nods Ducournau. "That made me cry my eyes out. I bawled. I think that both Danny Boyle and I tried to implement sacredness. To build monuments to those we haven't just lost, but have shunned. The ones that we vomited out of society, the ones that we pointed at, that we shamed."

Ducournau's work is always empathetic, never shying away from hard truths. It is one big continuous "gesture", she says, consistently exploring mutation and existentialism. "I feel that I'm digging deeper, shedding skins throughout every film. But the core somehow remains the same." Long may she dig.

Clockwise from main: Alpha mater: Golshifteh Farahani and Mélissa Boros; Director Julia Ducournau discusses a scene; Boros with her onscreen brother Amin (Tahar Rahim).

***ALPHA* IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 14**

Alamy, State And Season Home Design/David Cannon Photography Inc., Shutterstock

JUDE LAW NOT INCLUDED

A HOMAGE TO THE HOLIDAY BRINGS THE ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE TO GEORGIA

AT THE HEART of Nancy Meyers' festive favourite, 2006's *The Holiday*, lies a cosy Cotswold cottage. Owned by Kate Winslet's Iris but occupied by Cameron Diaz's Amanda after a heartbreak-fuelled house-swap, the fire-warmed abode has earned its own fervent fanbase. Now, almost 20 years since the film's release, staunch admirers can live out that English countryside fantasy for real. They just have to travel to North Georgia first.

Here, Lucy Small, of home-design company State And Season, has recreated Casa Del Break-up from the ground up. The idea came to her when she clocked just how die-hard the film's following still is after all these years. "There are people who have tried to lay out the plans online," Small tells *Empire*. Of course, her home state is a considerable stone's throw from the film's quaint location, but it's not without its seasonal appeal. "The Hallmark Christmas movies are all filmed here," she explains. "Even where I'm sitting now, I can literally see our town's gazebo from my shop."

Yet bringing the cottage to life was no piece of Christmas cake. For one, the original building doesn't exist. Parts of its exterior were custom built — inspired by the Honeysuckle Cottage in Holmbury St Mary, Surrey — and the interiors built on a soundstage in Los Angeles. Small also had to fly under the radar somewhat. "I don't think there is a copyright issue, because it's freedom of expression — you can make copies of things," she says. So without consulting with anyone involved with *The Holiday,* the team had to rely solely on the film for reference. "Oh, the movie is ruined for me," Small deadpans, adding that she's watched it closely again and again... and again. "We had to watch it [what felt like] a million times to work out all of the angles and all of the beams. We literally [had] a beam schedule, because every beam is different."

With its doors now open to the public, *The Holiday* groupies are beginning to make the pilgrimage to Blue Ridge Mountains ahead of peak Crimbo season. Could this spark a new trend in Christmas movie-home recreations? A *Home Alone* replica with bonus boobytraps, perhaps? The proof will be in the figgy pudding. **BETH WEBB**

You too can enjoy Diaz like these: the holiday home in North Georgia is a faithful reproduction of the movie's original Cotswolds cottage.

THE HOLIDAY **COTTAGE IS AVAILABLE TO BOOK AT BOOKTHEHOLIDAYCOTTAGE.COM**

SPRINGFIELD-ING BACK INTO ACTION

WITH THE SIMPSONS MOVIE 2 CONFIRMED, HERE'S OUR SEQUEL SUBJECT WISHLIST

SPIDER-PIG'S BIG COMEBACK

As the breakout star of the original *Simpsons Movie*, Plopper the pig got his own superhero moment (and theme song!). Could we please see not only the return of Plopper's alias Spider-Pig, but also multiversal iterations of the same character, *à la No Way Home*? Their collective trotters could take down any nemesis. **BETH WEBB**

THE MILHOUSE MOVIE

Milhouse Van Houten is inarguably the show's best character — his mum says he's cool, after all — and while there have been episodes centred around Bart's bespectacled BFF, why not a whole film? If they could tempt original voice actor Pamela Hayden out of retirement, then everything would be coming up Milhouse. **JOHN NUGENT**

A MONORAILAISSANCE

Is it too much to hope that *The Simpsons Movie 2* could be a musical? The show's legendary songs are the perfect vehicle for its classic humour. Let's get Conan O'Brien back for a 'Monorail (Reprise)', and see if we can't put North Haverbrook, Ogdenville, and Brockway back on the map. Monorail! Monorail! Monorail! **BEN TRAVIS**

IN MEMORIAM

"He knew how to make you feel like you'd known him all your life"

ROBERT REDFORD AS REMEMBERED BY HIS LATE-IN-LIFE COLLABORATOR, DAVID LOWERY

MY VERY FIRST encounter with Robert Redford was not in *The Sting* or *Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid*. It was in the back pages of Blockbuster Video's coming attractions magazine. There he was, gazing out of the poster for Sydney Pollack's *Havana*, a four-of-hearts card in hand. It's an indelible portrait. Quintessential, even. Gentle and flinty at the same time, acquiescing to the inevitable, yet completely in control. *This* was what a movie star could do. They could give you one look and tell you everything without giving away a thing.

It was this same gaze that I attached to my understanding of independent film a year or two later, when my mother told me about the film festival in Utah that this same movie star had founded, which soon became the North Star of my filmmaking aspirations.

It was there when I finally made it to the Sundance Film Festival with a short film, and saw him give his annual Directors Brunch speech.

And it was there, but only for a moment, when I walked into his office in Santa Monica in the spring of 2013 to find him already striding towards me, hand outstretched. It was quickly overtaken with a welcoming grin and a twinkle in his eye. "David!" he said. "I'm Bob Redford."

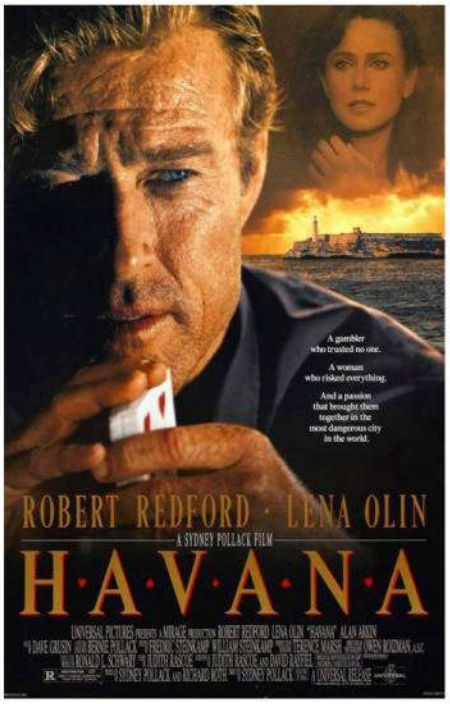
I would see him do the same thing countless times over the next few years; he knew how to put people at ease within the space of a handshake. He was never *not* Robert Redford, but he knew how to make you feel like you'd known *him* all your life, and not just the version of him you'd seen on screen.

We were meeting to talk about *The Old Man & The Gun*, a true story about a bank robber that he'd been wanting to make for years. He was finally ready to play the part, and he wanted to know if I'd be interested in taking a crack at it. The answer, of course, was yes. Of course I wanted to make a Robert Redford movie!

The first draft of the script that I wrote was very journalistic, which is how I came to discover I am not a journalist. I also found that, although I'd already made one movie with bandits, I wasn't particularly keen on the cops-and-robbers genre. I met with Bob a few

Above, top to bottom: As Forrest Tucker in 2018's *The Old Man & The Gun*; *Pete's Dragon*: Redford alongside Bryce Dallas Howard and Oona Laurence.

Alamy


A gambler who trusted no one.
A woman who risked everything.
And a passion that brought them together in the most dangerous city in the world.
ROBERT REDFORD · LENA OLIN
A SYDNEY POLLACK FILM
H·A·V·A·N·A

Main: Director David Lowery and Robert Redford making 2016's *Pete's Dragon*. **Left, top to bottom:** Iconic in *Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid* (1969); Gazing out of the poster for *Havana* (1990).

times to go over the drafts as they progressed. He hadn't been there the year I attended the Sundance Screenwriters Lab (the legacy of which is deserving of its own separate essay), but now here I was, getting my own personal one-on-one notes session with the man who'd dedicated his life to helping storytellers find their voice.

As we discussed those early drafts, he both directly and indirectly guided me towards the version that was truer to my voice. I know he was also thinking about the project from the perspective of an actor who would be playing the lead role, and a producer who would be overseeing the entire film; but he gave me the very same gift he'd given to so many other filmmakers and artists over the decades: the confidence to make it mine.

And while I wasn't interested in criminals, per se, I was interested in the archetype of the outlaw; I could see a glimmer of myself in that iconography, and I could also see all of Bob. He had that spirit, through and through, and that's what I wound up trying to write about.

It was in one of those script meetings — in a hotel restaurant on the Upper East Side that instantly made me think of *Three Days Of The Condor* — that I mentioned another movie I'd been developing might be ready to go first, and that there was a part in it that I'd love for him to take a look at. He did, and a few months later we were in New Zealand together making *Pete's Dragon*.

His first day on set, we were shooting a truck chase out in a field. It was a fairly unceremonious start for him, but right before the cameras rolled, our boom operator looked at me and said, "You're about to direct Robert Redford!"

Which I was, and I was (hopefully quietly) totally freaking out about that. But I soon learned that Robert Redford was an actor who was there to act. He wanted me to direct him. *Trusted* me to direct him. I can't understate what a gift that was. He was an actor who would come to set and stay there; who would sit off to the side running lines with his co-stars, his driver, his assistant, so that he'd be ready when the cameras rolled. If there weren't any lines to rehearse, he'd be there anyway, reading his beloved *New York Times*.

He was also an actor who, on his off-days in New Zealand, hiked up a glacier, met with local indigenous communities, and rescued a horse. Let me say that again: *he rescued a horse.*

We wrapped *Pete's Dragon* and I went home and rewrote *The Old Man & The Gun*. This time, I felt I knew how to write it specifically for him. Not for the icon with that pensive gaze that I'd first encountered in a video-store advertisement, but for Bob, the actor with that twinkle in his eye and that easy charm. I stopped stressing about the legacy of *Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid* and *Jeremiah Johnson* and instead thought about the moments on set where Bob would improvise just to make us laugh. We had 31 days and a modest budget and I decided that the best thing we could do was to just have fun, surround ourselves with friends and make sure we ended every day with a smile. The legacy would take care of itself.

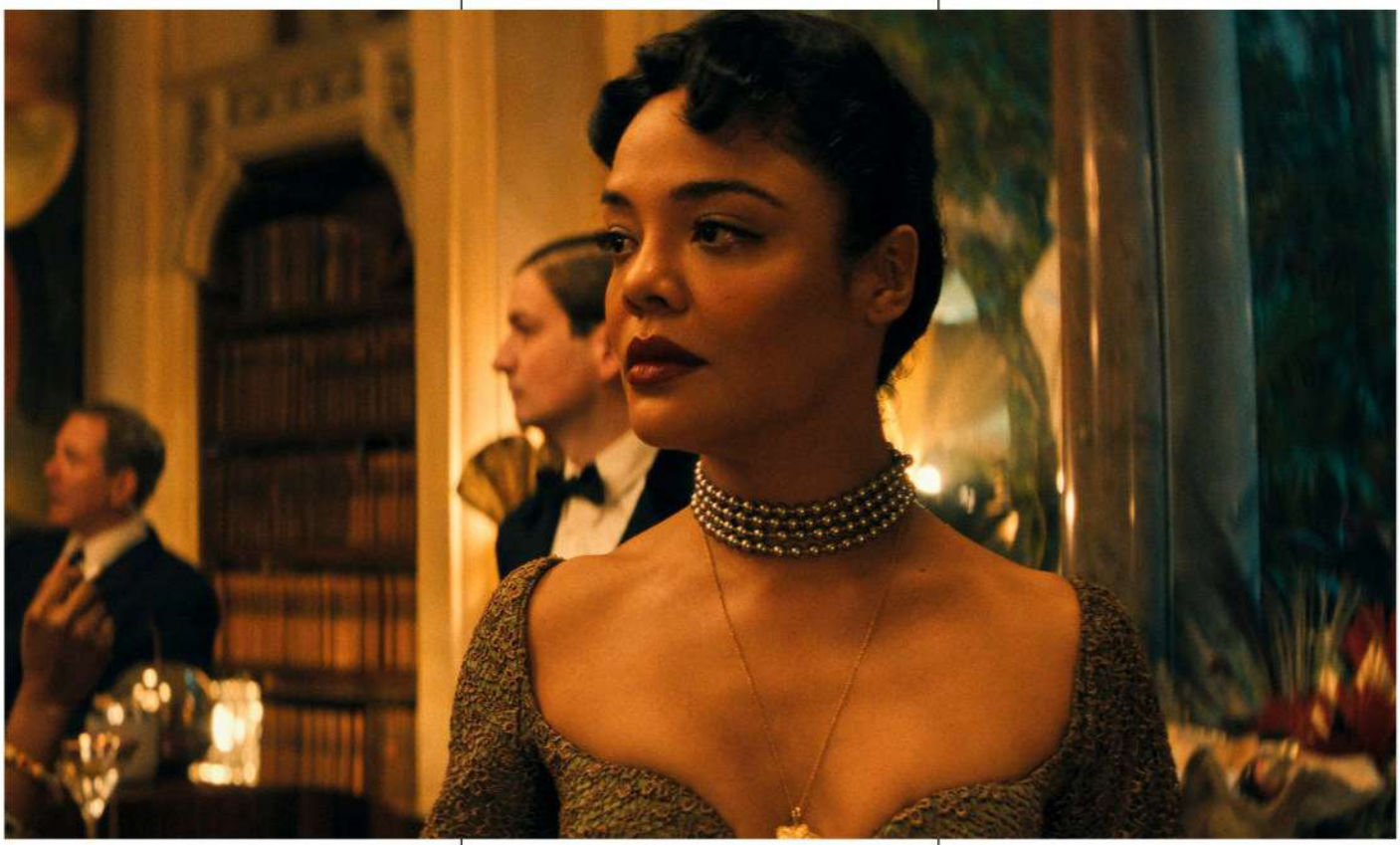
We shot the bulk of the movie in Ohio, and the last day there, we travelled to a prison to shoot all of the scenes of Forrest Tucker behind bars. We worked for over 18 hours that day, and Bob was there for every single one of them. At the end of the night, the crew returned to the hotel and congregated in the lobby bar, which had stayed open for us. There was Bob, sitting with everyone else, enjoying a tequila as the sun rose. We'd been going strong for over 20 hours at that point; he was still going stronger.

We regrouped in Fort Worth, Texas, which is where the real Forrest Tucker was laid to rest. The night before we started, I showed Bob and his wife Bylle the first ten minutes of the movie, and they were thrilled. We then spent a few days driving around Fort Worth and Waco, rolling up to locations, hopping out and shooting as many bank heists as we could; it felt like we were making a student film, one which just so happened to star one of the greatest movie stars in film history. Something felt just right about that. The final night, we set up a payphone on a random street corner and filmed a scene of Bob making a phone call, with the city lights twinkling behind him. By this point we all knew that this was possibly going to be his final film, but no-one was thinking about that. We were just making a movie with Bob. We got it in two takes, I called cut. I shook his hand and gave him a hug and off he went into the night.

A few months later I sent him a cut of the film. He called me as soon as he'd watched it. "David," he said, "This is Forrest Tucker! I love it."

I couldn't see him, but I could hear that twinkle in his eye, that wonderful smile. We locked picture that day.

All these memories and more have been welling up these past few weeks. I keep thinking about his stories — he had so many stories, all of them incredible, all of them evidence of that outlaw spirit. And I also keep thinking about this one day in New Zealand, where we had to stop filming to to wait for a storm to pass. Most people drifted away, but Bob and I stayed on set, enjoying a rare quiet moment amidst the melee of moviemaking. We just sat there, not speaking, not needing to speak, and I thought to myself: "This is a memory I will carry with me for the rest of my life." A few stray minutes on the far side of the world, listening to the sound of rain on a tin roof, in the company of a legend I was lucky enough to call a friend.



On A Role

TESSA THOMPSON IS HEDDA GABLER

THE ACTOR PLAYS THE TITLE CHARACTER IN 1950s-SET IBSEN ADAPTATION *HEDDA*

WORDS **HELEN O'HARA**

THE PAST INCARNATIONS

Hedda Gabler, the destructive, unhappy lead character in the Henrik Ibsen play on which Nia DaCosta's new film is based, has been called "the female Hamlet": the role every serious actor longs to play. Faced with this complicated figure, Thompson immersed herself in adaptations. She went to archives in London and New York to watch every version she could find: films, filmed stage shows, performances in foreign languages, even dance interpretations. "I loved seeing what Cate Blanchett did, or Fiona Shaw. Regrettably, there wasn't a recording of [Thompson's co-star in the film] Nina Hoss playing Hedda in Berlin. But it was a gift." However, the actor made a promise to herself that she would watch everything just once. "Eventually we thought, 'You know what, we're doing something completely different.' At that point, we just left the play alone. This script became the bible, and that really set us free."

Top: Tessa Thompson as Hedda. **Middle:** Dressing to impress. **Above, left to right:** Shirley Bassey; Flintham Hall: main filming location and site of fierce on-set Uno games.

THE PERIOD

Thompson likes to stay in her characters' headspace as much as possible. This meant reading the sort of magazines and social guides that her Hedda, as the daughter of a general who's trying to cement her place in society, might have consulted. "I was very curious what women were told about themselves during that time. I felt like Hedda would be someone who would have devoured etiquette books." Then, to help her step into the '50s set-up, she made playlists that were heavy on jazz trumpeter and saxophonist Ornette Coleman, with a little Shirley Bassey thrown in too. "Spiritually, she just felt right."

THE LOOK

Hedda spends the night of the party at which the film mostly takes place in a green, Dior-style party dress (made by costume designer Lindsay Pugh), cinched ultra-tight to give Thompson the wasp waist that was fashionable at the time. That's combined with a pearl choker — "this constricting necklace; the sensation of it made it kind of hard to take a breath". It's all an effective representation of how restrained Hedda feels. But the voluminous skirt also subtly contributes to the character's story. "We loved the idea of Hedda taking up a lot of space with the sheer circumference of this dress. To that end, we also loved the idea of her sort of diminishing and deflating over the course of the film," Thompson explains. "So we had all these underpinnings that we would take out, depending on where we were in the evening, and chart this emotional landscape."

THE DOGHOUSE

Thompson worked on getting to know Flintham Hall, their principal location. "The house had so much character. I would spend a lot of time [building up] my own relationship with it." But the challenges of such a historic setting were considerable: the cast were confined to a small room called the 'dog room' between shots, where they wouldn't damage the walls by leaning on them in the wrong way, or were exiled to a tent where heated games of Uno were often underway. Thompson spent most of her free time there, surrounded by other people, so that she'd feel Hedda's sense of permanently being on display. At least she could play a few rounds from within the bell jar.

***HEDDA* IS IN CINEMAS FROM OCTOBER 24 AND ON PRIME VIDEO FROM OCTOBER 29**

Getty Images, HistoricHouses.org

TO INFINITY (CASTLE) AND BEYOND

HOW ANIME MEGA-HIT DEMON SLAYER IS TAKING OVER THE BOX OFFICE

IT'S THE ANIME juggernaut that turned Channing Tatum into a fanboy, the record-breaking blockbuster with a title as long as your arm and legions of fans the world over. It's *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba — The Movie: Infinity Castle*, the latest theatrical epic in the all-conquering *Demon Slayer* franchise, a multi-media sensation that has come to epitomise Japanese comics (manga) and animation (anime) on the world stage.

Adored for its rich storytelling, relatable characters and lavishly violent action, *Demon Slayer* follows a young boy's journey of revenge against the demons that killed his family in an alternate, fantasy-tinged spin on early 20th-century Japan. *Infinity Castle* continues the saga, with two-and-a-half hours of high emotion and intense action set-pieces set within the walls of the physics-defying, multi-dimensional titular fortress.

Simply put, it's a big deal. Koyoharu Gotouge's original manga series has shifted over 200 million copies, and its anime adaptations on big and small screens have fostered a dedicated fanbase. Among those young disciples is one Everly Tatum, who got her dad hooked on the series, resulting in Channing stepping up to the recording booth and lending his voice to the American dub of this new instalment, as the *dojo* master Keizo, a key figure in the origin story of

Top: Have a slay day: Giyu Tomioka. **Above, left to right:** Channing and Everly Tatum; Akaza's a bit of a demon.

demon antagonist, Akaza.

Infinity Castle is the first anime film to have grossed over $100 million in the States, and it has already surpassed all Japanese films, period, in its global box-office takings (currently over $600 million). One of the architects behind this breakthrough is Crunchyroll, the streaming platform that helped pull anime out of the shadows of online piracy and, since being acquired by Sony in 2021, has become a leading force in distributing anime worldwide. The stage was set for a smash.

And so anime, once again, is on the rise. But take a wider view, and *Demon Slayer*'s success fits neatly into a year where East Asian animation rules; just look at China's *Ne Zha 2*, which currently wears 2025's global box-office crown after making $2 billion in ticket sales. The days of Hollywood dominance are over: the future of animation may be international. **MICHAEL LEADER**

***DEMON SLAYER: KIMETSU NO YAIBA — THE MOVIE: INFINITY CASTLE* IS OUT NOW**

WORLD-LEADING MEN

THE ACTORS ELECTED TO TAKE OFFICE PLAYING BOTH THE UK PM AND POTUS

IDRIS ELBA

(HEADS OF STATE / A HOUSE OF DYNAMITE)

Elba is the most recent star to enter this particular political-performance pantheon, with his roles as Prime Minister and army veteran Sam Clarke in Ilya Naishuller's Prime Video action-comedy *Heads Of State*, and as the unnamed US President in Kathryn Bigelow's nuclear drama *A House Of Dynamite*. He's also the only one to play both roles in the same year — that's some real effective door-knocking.

GARY OLDMAN

(DARKEST HOUR / OPPENHEIMER)

Oldman donned major prosthetics to play Winston Churchill in Joe Wright's 2017 drama *Darkest Hour*, sitting in the make-up chair for over three hours each day. It paid off, though, with him winning the Oscar, BAFTA, Golden Globe *and* SAG award. His appearance as 33rd POTUS Harry Truman in Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* was much more of a supporting role, but no less impactful.

ANTHONY HOPKINS

(YOUNG WINSTON / NIXON / AMISTAD)

In 1972, Hopkins appeared as Prime Minister-to-be David Lloyd George in Richard Attenborough's *Young Winston*, but the Welsh icon has played two different Presidents. He is a ruthless Richard Nixon in Oliver Stone's 1995 biopic, and 6th US President John Quincy Adams in Steven Spielberg's historical drama *Amistad* — and bagged Oscar nominations for both. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

The start of a beautiful friendship

DIRECTOR SCARLETT JOHANSSON AND STAR JUNE SQUIBB ON MAKING ELEANOR THE GREAT, A BUDDY MOVIE WITH A TWIST

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

BOTH SCARLETT JOHANSSON and June Squibb have an affinity with New York. Johansson was born there in the '80s, and Squibb, who got her start in theatre, has been performing on Broadway since the late '50s. It's fitting, then, that they should come together for *Eleanor The Great*, the story of a 94-year-old woman's new start in the Big Apple, which is Johansson's directorial debut. Based on a screenplay by Tory Kamen, the comedy-drama sees Eleanor (Squibb) strike up a friendship with 19-year-old student Nina (Erin Kellyman) after losing her live-in companion and Holocaust survivor Bessie (Rita Zohar). With Nina having recently lost her mother, the pair find solace together in the city. Speaking with *Empire*, Squibb and Johansson talk about the forging of their own unique partnership.

What first attracted you to the script?
Scarlett Johansson: The Holocaust-survivor story, and the urgency and importance of sharing it, was very moving to me. The intergenerational friendship was touching, [as was] the love that these characters all have for one another as they process grief. I found it surprising, too, because I started reading the

Clockwise from main: June Squibb and Scarlett Johansson in Cannes this year; Squibb as Eleanor with Erin Kellyman as Nina; Talking therapy; Rita Zohar (left) as Bessie; Johansson with her figurative director's cap on.

Getty Images

script and thought that it was a kind of quippy comedy, and then it took such a profound turn.
June Squibb: I felt that it was something that I should do the minute that I started reading it. It's wonderful that you see so many sides of a woman this age, which we don't see that often. I like that she's not the nicest person in the world. And I like comedy — if I'm going into a heavy piece, I want to see some lightness in it.

How else would you describe Eleanor?
Squibb: [There's] a scene when she's leaving Florida, which I think just sets up who she is. She's just lost Bessie, which was very troubling for her. She's thinking, "I'll go to New York to be with my daughter." But she still [jokes to her neighbour], "I slept with your husband." You're getting everything from her right away.
Johansson: She's an impossible person. She's salty for sure, but then we see her in the private moments, and you see that she has such a love for Bessie, and the friendship that was so important to her. You get to see all of the human sides of her, the uglier sides, and her vulnerabilities too.

June, did being directed by Scarlett, given her background in acting, feel different?
Squibb: It was terribly helpful, because it felt like I didn't have to push myself. I didn't have to rush. I felt that Scarlett knew all of the time where I was going, what I needed, what I didn't need. It was like a shorthand between us. We really knew what each other was thinking.
Johansson: And I think June and I — we haven't really talked about this, but I think that we work similarly as actors. I understood her process because it's not dissimilar to my own. Once you're on set and in the scene, you're ready to work.

Do you have a favourite performance of each other's?
Johansson: The first time I was like, "That's such an extraordinary performance," was for June's performance in *Nebraska*. I can't even imagine another person doing that. (*To Squibb*) And you're also playing an impossible person. But she's all of us too. She's saying what everyone's thinking, but no-one wants to say. I just loved that performance. Well, obviously everybody did, because you were nominated for an Academy Award.
Squibb: And I loved *Jurassic World Rebirth*. I saw it in the theatre, which I don't go to that often, and I thought you were so great. You were so cool, and physically you were doing what was necessary.
Johansson: I was not expecting that.
Squibb: I've seen a lot of your work, and you're a beautiful actress. But that really knocked me out.

There are great scenes of Eleanor and Nina traversing New York as they become friends. Do you have a favourite New York movie?
Johansson: I don't know if it's my favourite, but I did just watch a movie that I hadn't seen before and I was like, "Oh, it's great to see New York in this way" — *King Of New York* with Christopher Walken. It shows such an amazing side of [the city] in a very specific time that I remember as a kid. It's photographed so beautifully [but] it's a brutal film. I would say that my *favourite* New York movie is *Crossing Delancey*. I hope that it's baked a little bit into this movie.
Squibb: And I love all of Woody Allen's New York films. (*To Johansson*) I think he takes time to see the city, as you did.

Would you work together again?
Johansson: Yes; we would have to do something different to this time. There's a lot of June to explore. (*To Squibb*) I mean, you can do anything. I love your dramatic work. So I think it would be something in a dramatic direction.
Squibb: Yes, I think we do work well together. I would trust her with anything.

How about a *Jurassic World Rebirth* sequel?
Johansson: (*To Squibb)* How do you feel about humidity?

ELEANOR THE GREAT **IS IN CINEMAS FROM DECEMBER 12**

The show dissecting daddy issues

NEW SERIES THE DEATH OF BUNNY MUNRO PROBES THE PERILS OF FATHERHOOD

WORDS **LAURA VENNING**

TO PARAPHRASE THE poet Philip Larkin, they fuck you up, your mum and, well, mostly your dad. As is the case in Sky's dark and bawdy miniseries *The Death Of Bunny Munro*. Based on the novel by the musician and screenwriter Nick Cave, the '00s-set show follows beauty salesman and Lothario Bunny (Matt Smith), who's saddled with his sensitive nine-year-old son Bunny Junior (Rafael Mathé) after his wife dies by suicide.

The pair embark on a chaotic road trip around Sussex, with sex-addict Bunny neglecting his son and indulging in all his vices, haunted by his guilt over his wife's death and the trauma inflicted by his own father, Bunny Senior (David Threlfall). Oh, and there's a serial killer on the loose to boot.

"It's about fatherhood and the failure of that, and that being passed down generations, and hopefully that cycle being broken," says Smith, who enjoyed the challenge of working with an unlikable character. "I actually think it's a show that's full of heart [and] how fucked up our parents make us."

Indeed, when *Empire* travels to Brighton in August 2024 to see Smith in action, we witness father and son try to connect, in their own strange way, at a beauty expo. Amid a backdrop of giant, plastic silver-and-lilac lipsticks in a seaside convention centre — a regular haunt for our leading pick-up artist — Bunny encourages his introverted son to go and buy a Coke by himself. A simple gesture at face value, but underneath it is a tender vote of confidence.

Between takes, Smith exchanges notes with director Isabella Eklöf. "It's in the zeitgeist to talk about toxic masculinity, and now we're in a place where we can talk about how it affects men," she tells *Empire*. Eklöf, known for her work on hit HBO/BBC show *Industry*, tackled the show's misogyny head-on. "Isabella is totally bold and fearless," says the show's executive producer Emily Harrison. "She'll both be quite unflinching with Bunny's behaviour but also less judgmental. I can imagine a male director being anxious about this depiction in a way that I think you're free from if you're a woman."

Top to bottom: Drinks break: Bunny (Matt Smith) and Bunny Junior (Rafael Mathé); A touch-up for Smith on set; Father and son hit the road.

Bunny isn't easy to love, but having played the likes of Charles Manson and Daemon Targaryen in *House Of The Dragon*, Smith's pretty used to digging deep to find the humanity in a character. "He's a father, a son and a fuck-up, but he's an addict," says Smith. "We're not endorsing or excusing his behaviour, but he's suffering from grief and having a mental breakdown; he's a human being." This may not be one happy Bunny, but he's trying his best.

THE DEATH OF BUNNY MUNRO **IS ON SKY ATLANTIC AND NOW FROM NOVEMBER 20**

FIGHTING FIRE WITH SATIRE

HOW SACRIFICE TAKES HOLLYWOOD GLITZ TO TASK

Movie star/ potential sacrificial offering Mike Tyler (Chris Evans). **Below:** With cult leader Joan (Anya Taylor-Joy).

CHRIS EVANS IS no stranger to multiverses. And so it's fitting that in Romain Gavras' *Sacrifice* he is — to a degree — playing an alternative version of himself. As Mike, Evans embodies a world-famous movie star. Except this guy has gone off the reservation, donning a toga and wielding a flamethrower at a red-carpet premiere, chastising the phoniness of Hollywood as he "burns it all down". Oh, and he's developing a bald spot. "There were definitely things to draw on from his point of view," says Gavras about Evans playing a constantly scrutinised star. "We cranked the button to 11, the scope of the actor and him being confused by reality and what's happening to him."

That confusion fuels *Sacrifice*'s premise, which sees Mike attend a "bullshit charity gala" (as Gavras calls it), his first public outing since his toga incident. Things take a dark turn when he's taken hostage by a cult, led by Anya Taylor-Joy's Joan, who believe three people need to be thrown into a volcano to save the world. Yet Mike starts to enjoy the positive media coverage, getting more into the whole idea. "It's not that far-fetched, and it's cool to jump into a volcano," jokes Gavras.

The French filmmaker (and son of *Z* director Costa-Gavras) has assembled a high-octane cast for his first English-language film, including Salma Hayek (playing a pop star and wife to Vincent Cassel's richest man in the world) and John Malkovich as Joan's father. Charli XCX stars as a performer at the gala who is also taken, but weasels herself out of it with some crafty double-crossing. "I think Charli is going to become a brilliant actress," says Gavras.

Gavras' last film was 2022's *Athena*, an epic, action-packed drama centring on Algerian-French protesters after the brutal death of a 13-year-old at the hands of the French police. Though it wasn't popular in France — "It hits very close to home" — it took off in the US, and the director says he had carte blanche for his next feature. And with *Sacrifice*, Gavras set out to make something very different. "Everyone has a shot, at some point, of doing something insane," he says. "I was able to do that. Maybe I won't be again."

That "insane" idea combines his lifelong love of lava (he grew up watching volcanologists Katia and Maurice Krafft on TV) with his desire to poke fun at Hollywood charity galas. "Whether it's for show, or for virtue-signalling, or for a real reason, [these galas are] showcasing a lot of people who are trying to change the world," he sums up. "And they are sometimes clumsy with it, or sometimes wrong." Here's hoping nobody gets inspired by the flamethrower stunt. **MIKE RYAN**

***SACRIFICE* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE STRANGE BRAINS OF TEAM *EMPIRE*

BILL McCONKEY

BEN TRAVIS IS THINKING ABOUT... *THE UGLY STEPSISTER*'S NAUSEATING FINAL ACT

Over a week since I caught this lauded Norwegian body-horror *Cinderella* riff, I still feel ill. Hooray? One for *Substance* fans, the last reel is literally stomach-churning. Even thinking of the word "stomach-churning"... *nope*! Sick-bucket, please!

HARRY STAINER IS THINKING ABOUT... DAN STEVENS' VILLAINOUS VOCALS

Goldfinger and Le Chiffre, watch out. From *Eurovision* to *Swiped*, Stevens' love of globe-trotting voices seems destined to lead him to Britain's most notorious double-O, cat on his lap, ready to declare: "*Bonjour*, Monsieur Bond."

BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT... A NIGHTMARISH SCREENING SETTING

A reader recently told me of a screening of *The Descent* in an Icelandic cave. Surely this is a 'Don't go back into the house!' situation for anyone into horror? Although a *Descent* sequel set during a screening of it is the kind of meta mayhem I love.

An Apple Original Film

STILLER & MEARA
NOTHING IS LOST

APPLE ORIGINAL FILMS PRESENTS A RED HOUR / XTR PRODUCTION "STILLER & MEARA NOTHING IS LOST" A FILM BY BEN STILLER

MUSIC BY WILL BATES MUSIC SUPERVISOR GEORGE DRAKOULIAS EDITED BY ADAM KURNITZ, ACE DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JESSICA LEE GAGNE

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS BRYN MOOSER JUSTIN LACOB KATHRYN EVERETT TONY HSIEH ANDY HSIEH SUPERVISING PRODUCER MATTHEW CHERCHIO

PRODUCED BY GEOFFREY RICHMAN LIZZ MORHAIM JOHN LESHER BEN STILLER DIRECTED BY BEN STILLER

XTR IN SELECT CINEMAS **24 OCTOBER**

Original Films

How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Cristin Milioti

THE *IN YOUR DREAMS* ACTOR LOVES BREAKFAST FOOD, BUT NOT ON A HOT SUBWAY

WORDS **OLLY RICHARDS**

ARNO

Which movie have you seen more than any other?
It's a toss-up between *Kill Bill* and *Step Brothers*. *Kill Bill* is my favourite movie — and I'm talking Volumes 1 *and* 2. *Stepbrothers* is a movie that whenever it's on TV I will drop everything and watch it. I just can't look away.

What's the worst job you've ever had?
I've had many bad jobs. The chocolate company Hershey has an amusement park [Hersheypark] in Pennsylvania and I worked there for five months when I was 18, singing and dancing in a show about chocolate. I really, really hated it.

Aside from acting, what one thing do you do better than anyone else?
Spinning out. I'm pretty decent at catastrophising. It's not something I *want* to be good at.

How much is a pint of milk?
Well, I don't buy milk. I just don't like milk. A pint? And I'm doing this in British pounds? I'm going to say four pounds?

Have you ever written fan mail to anyone?
I wrote to Elvis Costello. I was ten years old. I was obsessed with two of his albums, which I'd listen to every day after school, and I wanted him to know how much his music meant to me. The albums were *The Juliet Letters* and *Spike*. I never got a reply. Oh, but you know who I wrote [to] the same year? The band Midnight Oil. And they wrote back!

What was your role in your first school play?
I want to say I was one of the hens in a retelling of *The Little Red Hen*. I was not the main hen. I was a supporting hen. Actually, I think everyone got to be a hen.

Whose poster was on your wall when you were a kid?
Not a poster, but what I did have on my wall was a framed photo of John Waters. My dad took me to meet him at a video store in Philadelphia. I loved his films. I was *way* too young to be watching them — I think I was nine. I told him what an enormous fan I was and that I wanted to be a director. He signed a headshot and wrote, "To the future." I had it hanging on my wall for years. It's not in my house or my parents' house and I would do anything to have it back.

What is the worst smell in the world?
The smell of someone, or many people, having peed in the subway and it's a heatwave day. That makes my skeleton want to escape my body.

What's your signature dish?
I'm excellent at breakfast. I'm great at eggs. I'm great at pancakes. Any other kind of cooking is really dependent on whether the muse strikes.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?
There is so much rejection in this industry. Someone once told me, "Man's rejection is God's protection." The jobs you don't get, or the things in your life that don't go your way, you just have to have faith that it's leading you on the right path. Usually I really bristle at things like that — it makes me roll my eyes — but that one has helped me over the years.

What's the most disgusting thing you've ever eaten?
In high school, when my parents were away, I remember going with a group of friends to this guy's house. He passed around a bottle of Baileys that had gone bad. I distinctly remember taking a giant sip and there being like a *chunk*.

If you could time travel, where would you go and why?
I don't necessarily want to go back in time as a woman, because there would be many dangers, but if I did then I'd like to see parts of the world before we wrecked it. I'd love to see what Manhattan looked like before we built on it. There are all these accounts of the Hudson River teeming with fish and on its shores were moose, wolves, bears, eagles. I'd be very interested in that.

What's your most irrational fear?
Venomous spiders. Because I don't live anywhere with venomous spiders, so it would have to be a spider that somehow figured out how to get access to me even though I live in New York.

***IN YOUR DREAMS* IS ON NETFLIX FROM NOVEMBER 14**

reviews

FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

OCTOBER 23 - NOVEMBER 19 2025 | EDITED BY **JOHN NUGENT**

★★★★★ EXCELLENT
★★★★ STRONG
★★★ GOOD
★★ WEAK
★ YIKES

Ground control: Anthony Ramos plays Major Daniel Gonzalez.

Top to bottom: Idris Elba as the US President; Dark days; Jake (Gabriel Basso) makes a run for it.

WATCH FIRST

For more traumatising, nuclear-attack-based viewing, seek out Mick Jackson's seminal 1984 BBC TV movie *Threads*. Focusing on civilians rather than those in positions of military power, It imagines two ballistic missiles landing in Sheffield, depicting the aftermath in devastating detail.

FILM

A HOUSE OF DYNAMITE

FROM *STRANGE DAYS* TO DOOMSDAY

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **112 MINS**

DIRECTOR Kathryn Bigelow
CAST Rebecca Ferguson, Idris Elba, Gabriel Basso, Jared Harris, Anthony Ramos, Greta Lee, Tracy Letts

PLOT The US military and government are blindsided by an incoming nuclear missile, launched by an unknown source.

FROM THE LATE 1980s to the turn of the millennium, Kathryn Bigelow was making exhilarating, borderline-trashy cult genre flicks like *Near Dark*, *Blue Steel*, *Strange Days* and *Point Break*. Later, she was granted prestige via her war-zone thrillers *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, the former of which made her the first woman to win an Oscar for Best Director. But she's been somewhat AWOL since the tepid response to her 2017 rogue-police drama *Detroit*, only directing a handful of short films over the past eight years.

What a relief, then, to report that *A House Of Dynamite* feels like a real return to form; a genuinely electrifying race-against-the-clock thriller that's as frightening as it is gripping. This isn't the first time Bigelow has tackled the existential terror of mutually assured destruction — 2002's *K-19: The Widowmaker* told the true story of a disaster aboard a Soviet nuclear submarine (that wasn't just Harrison Ford's awful Russian accent). But this time, Bigelow is unencumbered by history, free to speculate on what such a scenario might look like in all its sobering absurdity.

After being subjected to some stomach-churning statistics regarding the post-Cold War escalation of nuclear weapons, we're quickly drawn into multiple parallel storylines of people who each have a role to play, large or small, within the US' nuclear-defence plan — from the tie-wearing decision-makers in Washington DC to the troops on a faraway army base.

This is much less of an individual character study than *The Hurt Locker* or *Zero Dark Thirty*. If there is a protagonist here, it's probably Captain Olivia Walker, played by a steely Rebecca Ferguson. Her work day begins like any other, kissing her husband and son goodbye, arriving at the White House, imprisoning her phone in a secure locker and entering the Situation Room, a dark, subterranean enclave filled with screens soon to be broadcasting the stuff of nightmares. An intercontinental ballistic missile is heading straight for Chicago, and those working behind the scenes have to work out who launched it and how to respond to it, the fate of the world teetering on the edge of a precipice.

Noah Oppenheim, the screenwriter behind Pablo Larraín's *Jackie* and Netflix's cyber-attack series *Zero Day*, was previously president of NBC News, and his script teems with impenetrable acronyms and technical terms that we can safely assume are the real deal. Oppenheim splits the film into a triptych of interweaving perspectives, each one ending with the final moments before impact (or not, as there's always a chance the missile will malfunction), with the next chapter resetting to the beginning of the crisis and adopting the points of view of what seemed to be secondary characters. This does mean that some of the excellent ensemble cast are underused; Greta Lee, in particular, is barely given a chance to make an impression. Jared Harris has the most impact in the final section as the Secretary of Defence confronting the imminent death of his estranged daughter, but Gabriel Basso stands out as Jake, the rather hapless young Deputy National Security Advisor suddenly thrust into a key diplomatic position, much to his sceptical superiors' chagrin.

If there's an element of Hollywood fantasy here, it's that those in the White House are entirely honourable. The President is eventually revealed to be played by an affable Idris Elba, absent from initial calls about the crisis because he's shooting hoops with a girls' basketball team. His characterisation certainly feels like a hangover from the Obama era, but Oppenheim and Bigelow don't lionise their fictional POTUS either: his head of security (Brian Tee) wryly comments that, "He's my third [President] and they're all chronically late narcissists. At least this one reads a paper."

Bigelow wisely decides not to indulge in any spectacle of violence and destruction, knowing full well that her audience's anticipation of the inevitable is far more frightening than what she might be able to present visually. *A House Of Dynamite* might not tell us anything particularly new (surely we all know that nuclear weapons are terrifying), but it's delivered so deftly, it's difficult to care. If only all cautionary tales could be this brilliantly entertaining. **LAURA VENNING**

VERDICT Kathryn Bigelow is back with a bang. This is a bleak but adrenaline-pumping experience that'll leave you shaken, and searching for the nearest bunker.

At least they'd be good for paté and artisan bread post-job.

FILM

PLAY DIRTY

BACK IN BLACK

★★★

OUT **NOW (PRIME VIDEO)** / CERT **15** / **128 MINS**

DIRECTOR Shane Black
CAST Mark Wahlberg, LaKeith Stanfield, Rosa Salazar, Keegan-Michael Key, Chukwudi Iwuji, Nat Wolff, Thomas Jane, Tony Shalhoub

PLOT When professional robber Parker (Wahlberg) is double-crossed, he plans revenge — and the biggest heist of his career.

IT HAS BEEN seven years since Shane Black's last film, the muddled misfire that was franchise-revival-attempt *The Predator*. *Play Dirty* feels like course-correction. Yes, obviously, it's set at Christmas time — good luck finding a film in his catalogue that isn't — but there are other familiar hallmarks of the writer-director here, too: deadpan dialogue, dead bodies as punchlines, a hard-boiled throwback tone and a smoky score to boot. It's nowhere near the high-water mark of the man who was once the world's best-paid screenwriter — but maybe this is enough, for now.

This is the latest adaptation of the Parker novel series by Donald E. Westlake, a natural fit for someone of Black's sensibilities. Somewhat like Lee Child's Jack Reacher, Parker is a coldly efficient tough-guy character who has spawned many books but enjoyed mixed results on the screen; unlike Reacher, Parker is a prolific professional robber and all-round scoundrel. "I stole something and I got away with it," is all the backstory we get on this guy in the film, and there's something refreshing about how uncomplicated and to-the-point the character is, living by a simple if occasionally murderous code.

As Parker, Mark Wahlberg plays him with matching efficiency and a kind of grumpy impatience, getting the job done while never quite finding the charm or charisma of previous Shane Black leading men (Robert Downey Jr, a producer here, was previously tapped to star). We first meet Parker in the midst of a medium-stakes robbery; when he is betrayed, our anti-hero sets out for revenge — and a much bigger take. So begins an elaborate and messy heist involving a priceless statue that also, somehow, incorporates regime change in a South American country.

Were it not for the supporting cast, that narrative might feel overly convoluted. If Parker himself is mostly a grouchy presence, his crew lighten the load: LaKeith Stanfield is good fun as struggling theatre actor/career criminal Grofield; Keegan-Michael Key and Claire Lovering, as a married couple in Parker's team, do a nice line in undercutting anything too serious; and Black again shows a deftness in making traditionally forgettable henchmen the funniest part of any given scene. There's a strong sense of dark farce to it all — from the multiple corpses who somehow get better, to the man who has a fear of being thrown off a building again, and a very funny cameo from a real-life billionaire.

That sense of impish fun keeps it just above water. It allows you to forgive the slightly shoddy CGI, which undermines some otherwise solid practical stunts, and helps smooth over the occasional directing wobbles and oddly flat visual sheen. It's far from perfect, and some way off his '90s/'00s heyday, but amid a glut of streaming-only action-comedies trying to ape Shane Black, it's lovely to have the real McCoy back. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **Not quite vintage Shane Black, but this is fast and funny enough to be worth a couple of your hours. Squint hard enough and it almost feels like you're back in the '90s.**

MARVEL ZOMBIES

★★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **4 OF 4**
SHOWRUNNNER Bryan Andrews
CAST Iman Vellani, Dominique Thorne, Hailee Steinfeld, Todd Williams

One of the most tantalising scenarios from alt-universe series *What If...?* saw many beloved Marvel heroes turned into undead monsters; this miniseries wrings more gory fun out of that premise, as desperate survivors try to bring the world back from the brink. Creator Bryan Andrews and writer Zeb Wells are smart to keep Ms. Marvel as the lynchpin of the series, and Iman Vellani — lending her voice here — once again proves that she's one of the best casting decisions the MCU has ever made, expertly balancing humour and heaviness. Another highlight is Blade Knight, who looks like Mahershala Ali but is smoothly voiced by Todd Williams. The final minutes are a bit underwhelming, but it's a fun ride while it lasts. **AW**

A BIG BOLD BEAUTIFUL JOURNEY

★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **109 MINS**
DIRECTOR Kogonada
CAST Margot Robbie, Colin Farrell, Lily Rabe, Hamish Linklater

Director Kogonada reteams with his *After Yang* star Colin Farrell, pairing him with Margot Robbie for an unusually downbeat, fantasy-pocked love story. After meeting at a wedding, David (Farrell) and Sarah (Robbie) drive off together, stopping at doors which teleport them to places and moments that have helped define their lives. Sarah tells David she's a cheat, while David has his own unlikeable qualities. Tonally, it doesn't gel — its playfulness combines awkwardly with its bracing emotional honesty. That it's wrapped up in a plot similar to *Scrooged* but occasionally as minimally staged as *Dogville* makes it puzzling. Robbie and Farrell are engaging, but it's otherwise too confused to recommend. **LT**

Logging out: Daniel Day-Lewis as former soldier Ray. **Below:** Sean Bean as brother Jem.

FILM

ANEMONE

IN THE NAME OF THE (FUCKED-UP) FATHER

★★★★

OUT **7 NOV** / CERT **TBC** / **120 MINS**

DIRECTOR Ronan Day-Lewis
CAST Daniel Day-Lewis, Sean Bean, Samantha Morton, Samuel Bottomley, Safia Oakley-Green

PLOT Former soldier Ray Stoker (Day-Lewis) lives in the woods, a hermit-like existence that is interrupted when his estranged brother Jem (Bean) arrives with a plea for help.

FOR THE HORTICULTURALLY challenged, the anemone is a delicate plant that closes its petals as a storm approaches. For a story about withdrawing from the world and becoming emotionally bottled up, the flower-as-metaphor title is perhaps the most on-the-nose thing about Ronan Day-Lewis' feature debut. *Anemone* is co-written with and starring his father Daniel in his first on-screen appearance since 2017's *Phantom Thread*. It is sad, absurdist, brooding, tender and intense. What were you expecting? Broad toilet humour?

The dark heart of the matter is the fractured relationship between soldier siblings Ray (Daniel Day-Lewis) and Jem Stoker (Sean Bean). Twenty years after tours of duty during the Troubles, Ray survives off the grid in a forest (where Ocado definitely won't deliver), living a life made up of solitude, the Shipping Forecast and tinkering with electronics. In his absence, the better-adjusted, religious Jem has become a husband to Ray's ex Nessa (the ever-excellent Samantha Morton) and father to Ray's twentysomething son Brian (Samuel Bottomley).

As they come together, the screenplay has the confidence to play early encounters without dialogue, perceptively revealing the strange, often silent bonds between brothers. Gradually and convincingly, the pair begin to connect. Bean is

subtle and superb as the quieter Jem, coaxing his sibling to open up, the story exploring the impact of fathers on sons, the limitations of faith, and how violence only begets violence.

If it sounds talk-y and stage-bound, director Day-Lewis eschews kitchen-sink mundanity. While he may OD on drone shots that make tree tops look like broccoli, he's definitely one to watch. There is visual poetry at play, be it in an evocative use of slow motion (dancing, fighting, surprisingly similar), striking imagery (a stunning tracking shot through a countryside fairground) and a strand of Lynchian bonkersness that encompasses a freak hailstorm, a giant fish and, weirdest of all, a ghostly camel-like creature with a tiny dick. Mike Leigh, this is not.

When the story cuts back and forth to the worried Nessa and troubled Brian, it feels a bit like treading water until a fantastic dinner-table confrontation. But, unsurprisingly, the film is at its most compelling when observing Ray. With tightly cropped grey hair, tats and a Bill The Butcher-esque 'tache, Day-Lewis is by turns big and boisterous (marvel at him riffing on God's underpants, His testicles "swinging like church bells"), then small and shameful. Early on, he spins a stunning extended scatological tale that involves a priest and a Guinness-curry-laxative combo that is simultaneously funny and horrifying. It instantly takes its place in the DDL Monologue Hall Of Fame: some of that unexpected broad toilet humour at its best. Welcome back, sir. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT **A powerful story about father and sons, told by a father and son. At once a showcase for a monumental talent, and the arrival of an exciting new one.**

Let the battle for AI supremacy commence.

FILM

TRON: ARES

TRIP THE LIGHT-CYCLE FANTASTIC

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **119 MINS**

DIRECTOR Joachim Rønning
CAST Jared Leto, Greta Lee, Evan Peters, Jodie Turner-Smith, Hasan Minhaj, Arturo Castro, Gillian Anderson, Jeff Bridges

PLOT A sophisticated AI program known as Ares (Leto) is brought into the real world — triggering a deadly fight over the future of the technology.

TRON HAS ALWAYS been a bit of a gamble. The original 1982 Steven Lisberger-directed sci-fi, about computer programmers entering vast, gleaming software landscapes, was a huge risk, being one of the first films to make extensive use of CGI. Joseph Kosinski's *Tron: Legacy*, the belated 2010 sequel, was almost as risky, among other things for its early use of de-ageing technology, and for playing with what Jeff Bridges' Kevin Flynn described as "bio-digital jazz, man!" This third feature-length effort is a gamble, too: another revival of a series that has never quite earned enough critical or box-office love. To nudge it over that line, Disney has hired Norwegian director Joachim Rønning, a blockbuster-sequel specialist for the studio (*Pirates Of The Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales*, *Maleficent: Mistress Of Evil*), and an apparent safe pair of hands. As groundbreaking as the original was, it's a shame this latest effort pulls some of its creative punches — but it is, if nothing else, sufficiently pretty and noisy.

A pixelated prologue catches us up on the 15 years since *Tron: Legacy*, essentially explaining that Garrett Hedlund's Sam Flynn will not be returning. (Nor, sadly, does Bruce Boxleitner — this being the first *Tron* movie without an actual Tron.) In the vacuum Sam has left, a digital arms race for AI supremacy has emerged between two companies: the ENCOM of the original film, and newcomer Dillinger Systems. The former is now led by game-design superstar Eve Kim (Greta Lee), while the latter is headed by the circuit-board-tattooed Julian Dillinger (a delightfully yucky Evan Peters), grandson of David Warner's Ed Dillinger from the original. A proper rotter, Julian would even step over his own mother, it seems, having shuffled mum Elisabeth (Gillian Anderson, bringing some Thatcherite chilliness) out of the top job.

So the race is on between these two mega-corps for creating AI that can be brought into the real world by giant, advanced 3D printers. The only hitch? They need a "permanence code", an algorithmic MacGuffin which only Eve has managed to track down, having located it on Kevin Flynn's old server. "Whoever controls the permanence code, controls the future," intones Julian, *à la Dune*.

Thus begins a hectic and boisterous nerd-off. There was perhaps an opportunity for a smarter take on the current dominance of tech bros and AI — *The Social Network* with added lasers, perhaps — but instead we have a fairly lightweight slice of sci-fi silliness, peril upon peril, peppered with leaden dialogue like, "Prepare the particle laser!" As rich as the 3D graphics are, the characterisation and narrative themes are pure 2D, pixel-thin. Don't expect profound musing on the human condition here. "Being human is hard," notes one character, sagely. It's certainly hard for Jared Leto's Ares, who, like so many movie artificial intelligences before him, must learn to know now why you cry. Ares is the weakest part of this, the script

KEEP 'EM PEELED

Examine the crowd during the game-launch scene. One attendee is wearing the famous '*Tron* Guy' suit — the internet-famous homemade costume made by superfan Jay Maynard.

Top to bottom: Get with the program: Jodie Turner-Smith as Athena; Power of three: Eve (Greta Lee), Ares (Jared Leto) and Seth (Arturo Castro); Jeff Bridges is in like Flynn.

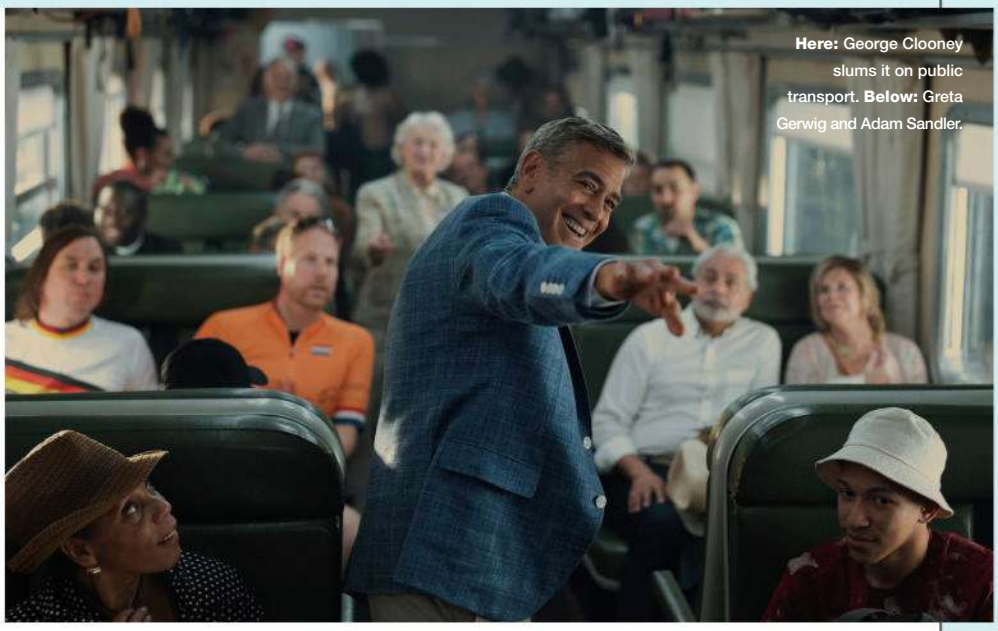
unconvincingly giving this rather empty cipher a goofy love of '80s kitsch and Depeche Mode.

A few key elements keep this data file from being totally corrupted. Greta Lee, making her blockbuster debut after breaking our collective hearts in *Past Lives*, is a likably down-to-earth lead, quietly muttering, "Oh my *God*," under her breath when she first enters the Grid, and finding everything that happens to her to be correctly ridiculous. Jodie Turner-Smith, meanwhile, is enjoyably non-human as the program Athena, terrifyingly poised behind smoky eyes.

The real MVPs, however, are Nine Inch Nails, whose staggeringly brilliant soundtrack dominates the entire proceedings. Not since, well, the last *Tron* film, with Daft Punk's masterfully sweeping orchestral-bleeps mashup, has a film score elevated its material so significantly, so impressively. Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross are old hands at this now, but still: by turns twinkly intriguing and bone-rattlingly industrial, tech-noir by way of a grimy Berlin nightclub, it's an album which deserves far more regular rotation than the film itself.

That, paired with gorgeously rendered CGI and handsome art direction, gives the effect of a very flashy, very beautifully produced, somewhat shallow two-hour music video. You'll coo at the fun new things they have added light ribbons to (A wingsuit! A tank! A submarine! Swords!) in the manner of a toddler having some keys jangled at them. Sometimes, on a Friday night at the pictures, that's all you need. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT It's got as much depth as a floppy disk, but some lovely, shiny CGI and a brilliant score from Nine Inch Nails makes for a fun if forgettable bit of futuristic fluff.



Here: George Clooney slums it on public transport. **Below:** Greta Gerwig and Adam Sandler.

FILM

JAY KELLY

CLOONEY GETS META ON MOVIE STARDOM

★★★

OUT **NOVEMBER 14** / CERT **TBC** / **132 MINS**

DIRECTOR Noah Baumbach
CAST George Clooney, Adam Sandler, Laura Dern, Patrick Wilson

PLOT An ageing movie star (Clooney) embarks on an impromptu journey across Europe in search of who he really is.

IN THE MOST revealing scene in *Jay Kelly*, the handsome, salt-and-pepper-haired titular movie star (George Clooney) stands in the cramped toilet of a moving train, staring into a mirror. He states the names of actors like Cary Grant and Clark Gable aloud before reciting his own name with a different intonation each time, as if trying to unearth a performance as himself with every repetition. It relates directly to the film's opening with a quote by Sylvia Plath: "It's a hell of a responsibility to be yourself. It's much easier to be somebody else, or nobody at all."

With the exception of last year's *Wolfs* and, of course, those Nespresso ads, these days Clooney spends more time in the director's chair than in front of the camera. But in the sparkling, somewhat slight *Jay Kelly*, tailor-made for him by director/co-writer Noah Baumbach and co-writer/star Emily Mortimer, Clooney reminds us that he remains the consummate movie star; one of a dying breed.

After the lacklustre response to 2022's *White Noise*, Baumbach returns to familiar territory here, crafting a coming-of-middle-age comic drama influenced by Fellini's *8½*. Jay Kelly is beloved by all, especially his loyal but long-suffering manager Ron (Adam Sandler) and publicist Liz (Laura Dern). His younger daughter Daisy's (Grace Edwards) departure for a European jaunt before college confronts him

with his absence as a father, and the question of who he is when the cameras aren't rolling. With his staff in tow, he ditches a film shoot to chase her to Tuscany, gamely slumming it on a train full of awed normies, getting the chance to play the hero they all think he is.

As one might expect from this combination of cast, creatives and location, it's all immensely charming. The co-dependency between Jay and Ron feels genuine and Sandler's warm, vulnerable performance might grant him awards glory. Having already delivered for Baumbach in 2017's *The Meyerowitz Stories*, it's a pleasure to see him flex his dramatic muscles again here as a man who has constructed his entire identity around his love for his friend, wry smiles concealing a real desperation to be truly seen and understood.

Yet for all the film's loveliness, it's also rather thin. Interwoven flashbacks (that Jay physically steps into) reveal that he got his big break by screwing over his best friend (Billy Crudup), and why he's estranged from his older daughter (Riley Keough), little of which delivers the drama you'd hope it would.

Fun running gags playing on Jay's lack of self-awareness don't manage to disguise that Baumbach's customary archness is absent here, as if he's too nervous to make Clooney look bad, even through this fictional lens. But *Jay Kelly* is wistful, romantic and unashamedly old-fashioned, and would be a fitting swansong for Clooney as an actor, were he to retire. **LAURA VENNING**

VERDICT It's a real pleasure to be whisked across the world by Baumbach, but perhaps this cinematic glass of Prosecco goes down rather too easily.

★★★★★
'DIRECTOR STEPHEN DALDRY HAS TAKEN STRANGER THINGS AND MAGICKED IT INTO A SPECTACULAR PREQUEL.'
EVENING STANDARD
LIVE ON STAGE
STRANGER THINGS
THE FIRST SHADOW
THE MULTI AWARD-WINNING PLAY
SEE IT BEFORE THE FINAL SEASON PREMIERES GLOBALLY THIS AUTUMN
PHOENIX THEATRE

GEN V: SEASON 2

★★★★

OUT **NOW (PRIME VIDEO)** / EPISODES VIEWED **8 OF 8**
SHOWRUNNERS Michele Fazekas, Tara Butters
CAST Jaz Sinclair, Lizze Broadway, Maddie Phillips, London Thor

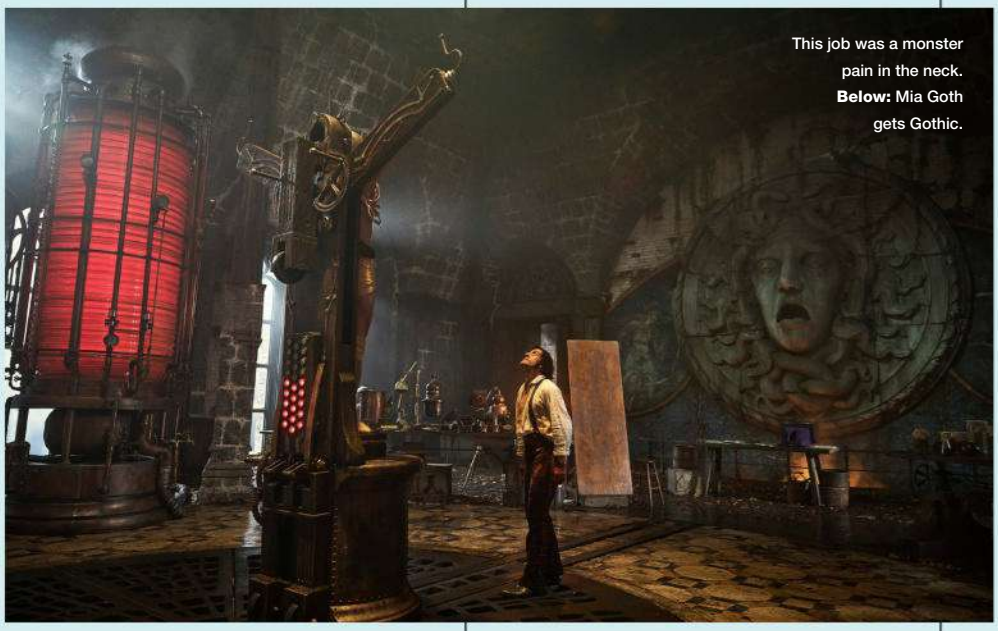
A shadow looms over the return of *The Boys* spin-off *Gen V*: actor Chance Perdomo, who played the metal-manipulating Andre, lost his life in a tragic motorbike accident just before filming began. Other shows might have recast, or hastily written him out — but *Gen V* honours Perdomo throughout these new episodes, rejigging the story to moving effect. This growth is felt throughout the season, prioritising character development in ways *The Boys* would sometimes do well to remember. The two shows remain intertwined: while the first episode opens with the usual grossout fare, *Gen V* quickly deepens and matures. What could have easily been a generic follow-up is instead setting the new standard for superhero TV in 2025. **DO**

GOOD FORTUNE

★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **97 MINS**
DIRECTOR Aziz Ansari
CAST Aziz Ansari, Keanu Reeves, Seth Rogen, Keke Palmer, Sandra Oh

Writer-director Aziz Ansari is Arj, a down-on-his-luck dude who attracts the attention of the low-ranking angel Gabriel (Keanu Reeves). To try and show him that money can't buy you happiness, Gabriel switches Arj's life with the luxurious one of rich venture capitalist Jeff (Seth Rogen) — but, as they all discover, it kinda can, and Arj refuses to switch back. All that star power is let down by an underdeveloped, largely unfunny script, which does explore America's inequality problems and the perils of cobbling together low-paid work, but in a way that feels first-base and performative. Keke Palmer's union activist Elena is luminescent, but *Good Fortune*'s good intentions don't make up for it being such a mediocre time at the movies. **SB**



This job was a monster pain in the neck. **Below:** Mia Goth gets Gothic.

FILM

FRANKENSTEIN

FINALLY, IT'S ALIVE!

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **150 MINS**

DIRECTOR Guillermo del Toro
CAST Oscar Isaac, Jacob Elordi, Mia Goth, Christoph Waltz, Felix Kammerer, Charles Dance

PLOT Mistreated and malcontent, a patchwork monster (Elordi) made up of ransacked body parts seeks revenge on its egotistical creator, Victor Frankenstein (Isaac).

GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S been talking about it since his 1992 feature debut, *Cronos*. He's been dreaming of it since 1971, when, aged seven, he first saw Boris Karloff shamble through James Whale's 1931 masterpiece. And now he's finally done it — adapted Mary Shelley's incredibly influential 1818 Gothic novel about a scientist playing God (with hellish results) into his very own *Frankenstein* movie.

Beginning in the Arctic, as the crew of a ship frozen in ice encounter Victor Frankenstein (Oscar Isaac) and the raging Creature (Jacob Elordi) that's pursued him to the end of the earth, we learn of the terrible preceding events: Victor's cold upbringing under a disciplinarian father (Charles Dance) after the death of his beloved mother (Mia Goth); his entry into the medical profession and his vow, inspired by trauma, to reanimate dead tissue; his granting of life to a jumbled corpse; his subsequent ill-treatment of the poor, innocent 'monster'; and his creation's turn from nobility to violence when he's warped by cruelty.

At once an unusually faithful adaptation of Shelley's book and a boldly personal take, del Toro's *Frankenstein* adds characters (Christoph Waltz's benefactor Harlander), switches up dynamics (Elizabeth, also played by Goth, is not appalled by the Creature, but embraces and educates it) and explores its own themes

(Catholicism, generational abuse). Here, Frankenstein is as much artist as scientist, his crafting of the creature not dissimilar to how del Toro sculpts his own cherished models or fashions such memorable monsters in his movies. Obsession can be good or bad, creative or destructive, and in a film that is ultimately about forgiveness, the writer-director finds it in his heart to absolve not just the creature but his monstrous creator.

Aptly, this screen rendition is comprised of stitched-together subgenres. It's part fairy tale, part dark fantasy and part body-horror — get a load of Victor scooping out organs and sawing through squealing bones. But it's perhaps best tagged as Gothic romanticism, in the vein of del Toro's own *Crimson Peak* or such handsome productions as Neil Jordan's *Interview With The Vampire* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. In fact, every frame is so dripping with burnished images, elaborate symbolism, ornate production design and a lyrical score as to feel somewhat overstuffed, and the two-and-a-half-hour runtime further ensures that this *Frankenstein* is a *lot*. But it's resolutely performed by all, dazzles with craft, and throbs with the passion of its creator. And if you thought the creature in Andy Warhol's *Flesh For Frankenstein* was sexy, wait until you get a load of Elordi in just a snug loincloth. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

VERDICT **Lightning, camera, action… *Frankenstein* is brought to life in glorious, Gothic fashion by Guillermo del Toro's painstaking artistry and Mike Hill's elegant creature design. A big film with a huge beating heart.**

BOOKS

THE MAKING OF ONCE UPON A TIME... IN HOLLYWOOD

NO FLAMETHROWERS NECESSARY

★★★★

AUTHOR **JAY GLENNIE**

WHILE THE WAIT continues for the tenth Quentin Tarantino film following the false start of 'The Movie Critic', here's something to tide fans over: a huge and in-depth account of the making of his ninth film, 2019's *Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood*. Lavished with photographs and coming in at almost 500 pages, this follows the film from its earliest beginnings to its legacy, with superb access to almost everyone involved.

The film's origins go back decades, with Tarantino starting and stopping work on the scenes that became part of Rick Dalton's story ever since the press tour for *Death Proof*. Cliff Booth came into focus after some in-depth discussions with Kurt Russell, while Rick — briefly called 'Scott Brown' — followed, introduced to Quentin as to the audience via a chat with Al Pacino's character. Many of the moments and anecdotes Tarantino describe in this early section ended up in the film's unconventional novelisation, and it's enlightening to see how he chose which darlings to kill to get the story to the screen, and which he chose to preserve in literary form.

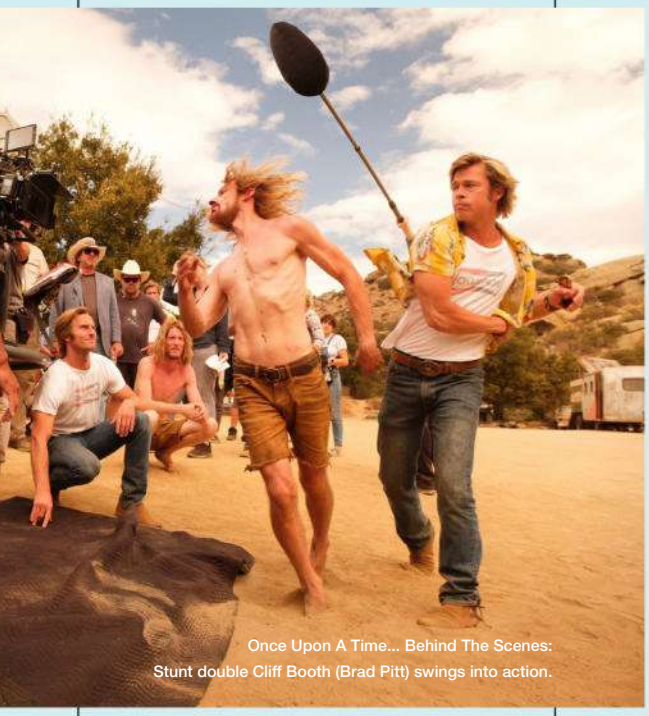
There are also some fascinating casting might-have-beens: Viggo Mortensen and Nicolas Cage were discussed as a lead pairing; Tarantino also met with Tom Cruise (Cruise could have played either, thought Tarantino, but, no surprise, gravitated to the stuntman), while Timothy Olyphant might have had a bigger role. James Landry Hébert, who played Manson Family member Clem, came close to the role of Tex before Austin Butler sewed that up. There's also a lengthy discussion of the late, great Burt Reynolds and everything he contributed to the film, in which he was due to appear as George Spahn before his death.

It's a treasure trove of anecdotes, which sometimes makes you wish that more repetitive sections had been significantly streamlined. Sure, everyone was thrilled to work with Tarantino and almost all had a whale of a time making the film, but we could have lost 50 per cent of the quotes saying so and still had copious words of praise. The director, after all, says that he wanted a warts-and-all book (for his own part, he admits to resentment that he missed out on a Screenplay Oscar) — but perhaps his cast and crew simply didn't see any.

That aside, the sheer enthusiasm bubbling off every page of this book makes this a genuine pleasure to read, and one that you can't wait to heave up off the coffee table again and again.

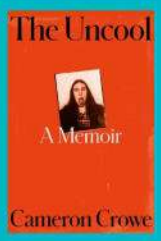
HELEN O'HARA

VERDICT It might have used a pass and polish for absolutely optimal text, but the sheer love and attention that everyone involved shows for this film is delightful.



Once Upon A Time... Behind The Scenes: Stunt double Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt) swings into action.

Andrew Cooper/Sony Pictures



THE UNCOOL

★★★★★

AUTHOR **CAMERON CROWE**

This gorgeous memoir from writer-director Cameron Crowe only touches on his film career. Instead, it's a personal history of his first vocation as music journalist — in effect, a novelisation of his 2000 autobiographical film *Almost Famous*. Crowe is a superb raconteur of rock romance, all anchored in familial pathos; his eccentric mother is a highlight, still hoping her son will go to law school, even after he wins an Oscar. Beautiful. **JN**

A FINE LINE BETWEEN CLEVER AND STUPID

★★★★

AUTHOR **ROB REINER**

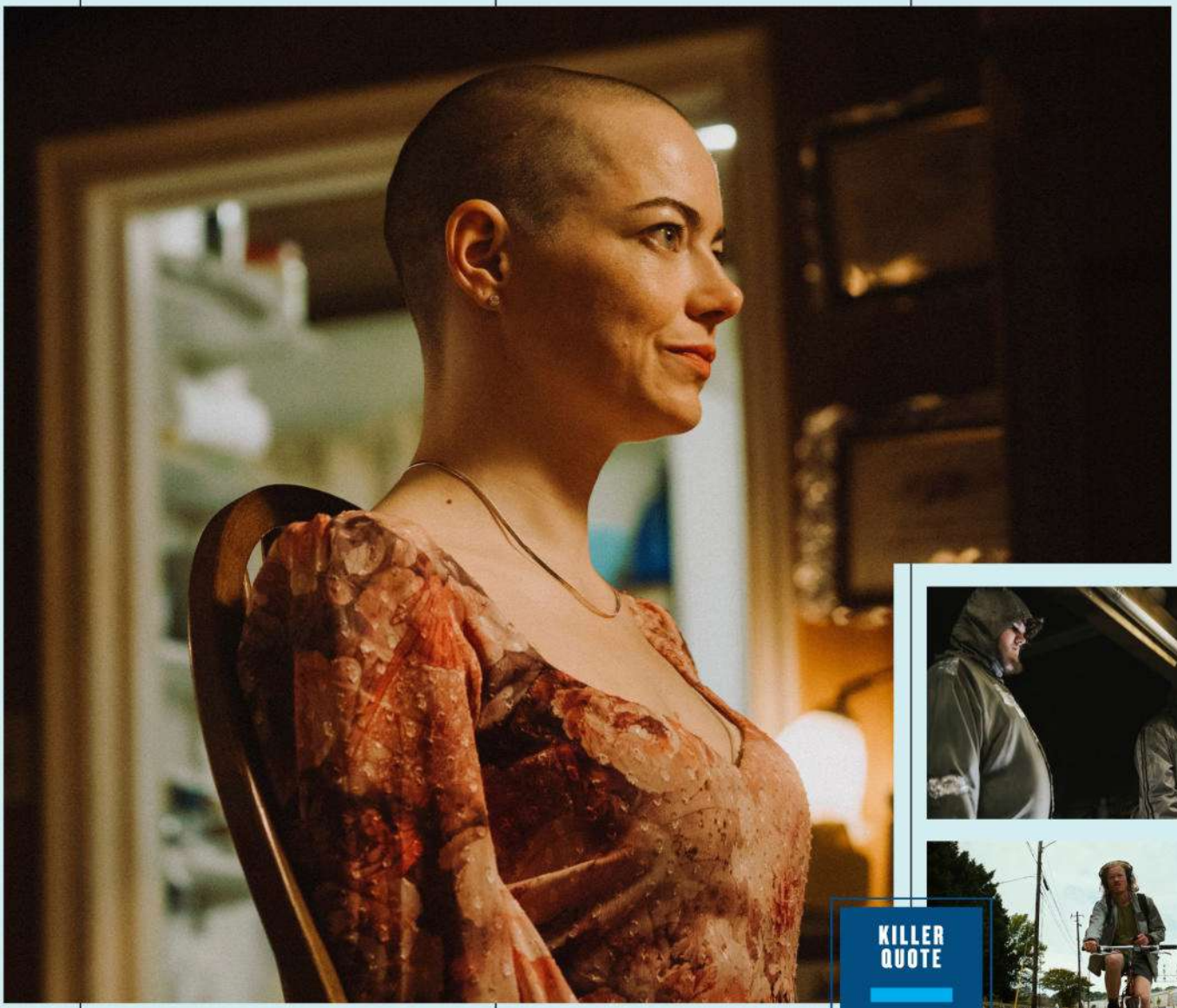
This Spinal Tap tome goes one louder. Most of the book is a straight chronicle of the franchise, with input from the stars, celebrity fans (including Martin Scorsese) and real-life musicians. But flip it around and you get a bonus B-side: a delightful in-character oral history of the band. Which at one point is derailed by a debate over whether there are people living at the centre of the Earth. **NDS**

STAR WARS: THE BLUEPRINTS

★★★★

AUTHORS **PABLO HIDALGO**, **J.W. RINZLER**

This is a particular treat for nerds who sit within the Venn diagram of sci-fi and engineering: a handsome collection of over 200 schematics and production drawings of spaceships, vehicles and droids from the galaxy far, far away. Pablo Hidalgo, the 'Yoda of Lucasfilm', updates the book originally written by the late film historian J.W. Rinzler, passionately celebrating the technical artistry that floods the franchise. **JN**



Clockwise from main: Emma Stone has a hair-razing day; Brothers in arms Don (Aidan Delbis) and Teddy (Jesse Plemons); The bees' knees.

FILM

BUGONIA

EMMA STONE'S BUZZY (AND BUZZ-CUT-Y) NEW SATIRE

★★★★

OUT **OCTOBER 31** / CERT **15** / **118 MINS**

DIRECTOR Yorgos Lanthimos
CAST Emma Stone, Jesse Plemons, Aidan Delbis, Stavros Halkias, Alicia Silverstone

PLOT Tech CEO Michelle Fuller (Stone) is kidnapped by conspiracy-theorist beekeeper Teddy (Plemons) because he thinks she's an alien.

IS THERE A director-actor partnership quite as creatively fertile as that of Yorgos Lanthimos and Emma Stone? Over the past decade, the Greek filmmaker has steered his favourite actor through a right royal fracas (*The Favourite*), a fantastical feminist fable (*Poor Things*), a pitch-black triptych (*Kinds Of Kindness*), even a 16-minute experimental opera (2022's *Bleat*). And back these oddball kindred spirits come, with the gripping and misanthropically funny *Bugonia*.

Stone here plays Michelle Fuller, the girl-boss CEO of Auxolith Biosciences. Terrifyingly panther-like, and taking all the wrong lessons from Chappell Roan lyrics, she is a true disaster capitalist, the kind to run diversity initiatives while passive-aggressively encouraging staff to work late, "if you need to".

But she is about to have a very bad day. Eccentric loner and beekeeper Teddy (Jesse Plemons) and his brother Don (Aidan Delbis), a couple of conspiracy theorists who spend too much time on the internet, hatch a hare-brained scheme to kidnap Michelle, shave her head (Stone gets a buzzcut for real on camera) and lock her in their basement. Her crime? She is a suspected alien from the planet Andromeda, sent to destroy the human race — and kill the bees.

Lanthimos is unafraid to bring the politics of our age to the core: Teddy has a stench of incel about him (he chemically castrates himself and his brother), spouting hatred of the elites. But the script takes care not to caricature him, suggesting a grief that has morphed into profound grievance. Cinematographer Robbie Ryan's unsettling wide-angle lenses contrast the scuzziness of Teddy's house with the coldness of Michelle's corporate world, two sides of one grotty coin.

Based on the bonkers 2003 Korean film *Save The Green Planet!*, it all plays out like a madder, more heightened version of *Misery*, if James Caan's character was accused of spraying neonicotinoid pesticides on bees. Set to Jerskin Fendrix's part-majestic, part-discordant score, a fascinating rhetorical battle ensues, in a power-dynamic back-and-forth, as both Teddy and we the audience engage in the farcical mystery of whether Michelle is indeed not of this world.

While it works perfectly well as a tense and darkly funny thriller, there are bigger ideas at play, the colony collapse of Teddy's bees serving as a dark omen of humanity's own end. What begins as Lanthimos' most straightforwardly accessible film yet ends wildly, divisively, and cynically. This is neither as uncomfortably unpleasant as *Kinds Of Kindness*, nor as weirdo crowd-pleasing as *Poor Things*, but it shows a director-actor collaboration in rude health. Long may it continue. **JOHN NUGENT**

KILLER QUOTE

"You will not defeat me, you sick Andromedan fuck!"
TEDDY (JESSE PLEMONS)

VERDICT **Riveting, unhinged, and sardonic to its honey-soaked core, this is another Lanthimos-Stone winner. (With a great opening-title typeface, to boot.)**

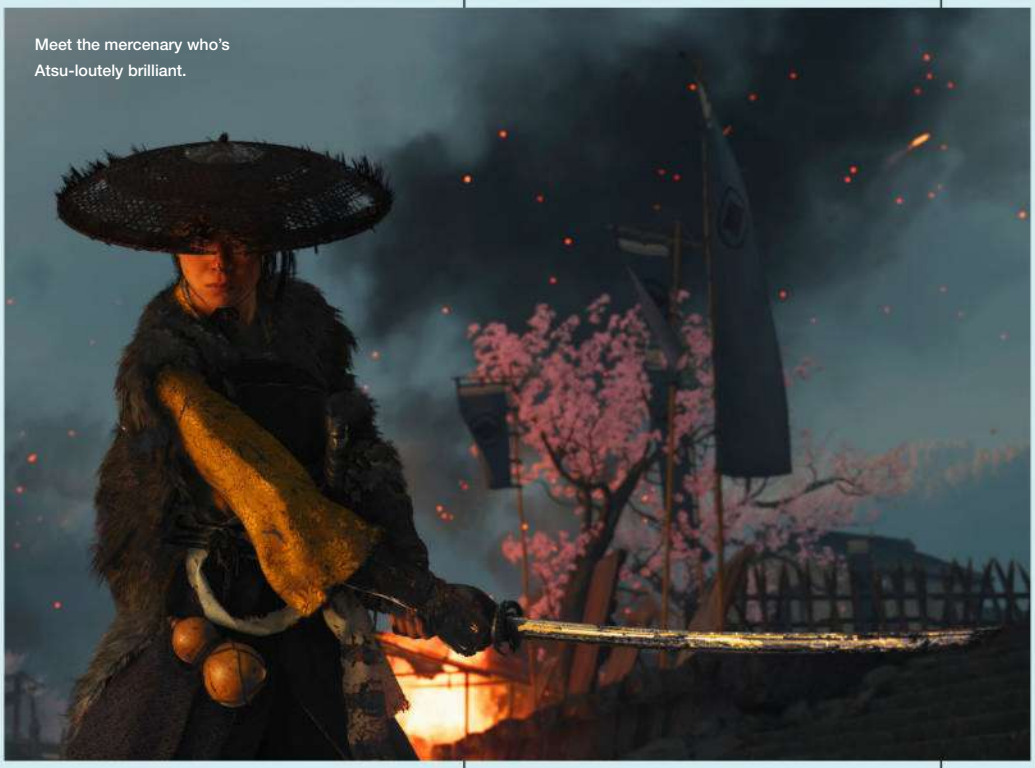
GAMES

GHOST OF YŌTEI

ONCE UPON A TIME IN FEUDAL JAPAN

★★★★★

PS5



Meet the mercenary who's Atsu-loutely brilliant.

IN THE ACCLAIMED *Ghost Of Tsushima*, players could follow adorable foxes that would lead them to character-progressing rewards. In this highly anticipated sequel, you're once again encouraged to track a furry friend into the forest. But In *Ghost Of Yōtei*, the animal is a majestic wolf and your reward is the beast potentially saving your backside in battle by tearing into the throats of your foes. It's a fresh take on befriending wildlife that is indicative of a game laudably separating itself from its predecessor.

On the surface, *Yōtei* seems to be giving fans more of what people loved about *Tsushima*: the opportunity to live out their Kurosawa dreams by carving a bloody path through picturesque feudal Japan from behind blade and bow. Supported by deep, satisfying combat, endlessly rewarding character progression, and the prettiest justification for a photo mode the medium has ever seen, *Yōtei* indeed delivers a similar samurai fantasy.

But rather than recycling its precursor's formula, *Yōtei* evolves what worked the first time while also introducing plenty of welcome new wrinkles. Fans will recall that *Tsushima* eschewed the open-world genre's typical icon-cluttered map for a more natural approach to uncovering its sprawling landscape. *Yōtei* leans further into this design philosophy, forgoing gamified features in favour of organic systems that support the story.

That wolf companion, for example, isn't just another weapon summoned by a button-press. Rather, you'll grow a natural bond with the beast, seeking out its dens to gradually broaden its abilities, as well as the chance for it to show up and save your bacon more often.

Character progression is handled similarly, trading the usual upgrade systems for more realistic paths. Earning new weapons doesn't involve cracking open a glowing chest, but tackling a lengthy, story-rich quest that'll see you seeking out and training with a *sensei*.

The ability to set up camps embraces this same approach. You can now stoke up a fire, cook some grub, and craft ammo wherever you like. Even better, these impromptu respites welcome visitors, so don't be surprised if vendors stop by offering new gear or map fragments marked with more goodies.

Of course, the elegance of the gameplay — including that esophagus-excavating wolf — is all in service to the storytelling, which also marks a significant departure from *Tsushima*'s. *Yōtei*'s narrative puts you behind the blades of Atsu, a mercenary with a dark past, a bounty on her head and a serious axe to grind with a group of animal-masked warlords called the Yōtei Six.

But more than another blood-soaked revenge story, her tale is incredibly nuanced, emotional, and engaging throughout. And, as evidenced by her toothy companion's appetite, it's a grittier yarn that's not afraid to get gory. **MATT CABRAL**

VERDICT ***Ghost Of Yōtei* will feel familiar to fans of its predecessor, but it also forges its own path, one that will make it a strong contender for Game Of The Year.**

CRONOS: THE NEW DAWN

★★★★

PC, PS5, NINTENDO SWITCH 2, XBOX SERIES X|S

A refreshing return to the survival-horror genre's nerve-fraying roots, *Cronos: The New Dawn* is a post-apocalyptic, time-travelling sci-fi shooter that has no problem leaving players in a puddle of their own pulpy viscera. The difficulty isn't for the faint of heart, but if you long for a time when ammo was scarce, inventory space limited, and monsters actually scary, then you'll want to suit up and brave this living nightmare. **MC**

BORDERLANDS 4

★★★

PC, PS5, NINTENDO SWITCH 2, XBOX SERIES X|S

A new generation of super-powered Vault Hunters wreaks fresh havoc in Gearbox's latest looter-shooter, bringing fun new combat abilities and much-improved traversal skills that make the gun-play zippier than ever. The series matures slightly, trading some slapstick comedy for a more serious story facing down a planetary despot, but it's not enough to reinvigorate the *Borderlands* formula, making this one for hardcore fans only. **MK**

SILENT HILL f

★★★★

PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

Shifting *Silent Hill* to 1960s Japan is a bold choice, but the anachronistic setting and folkloric monsters provide some of the most horrifying moments in the series' history. Combat disappoints slightly, even accounting for schoolgirl protagonist Hinako's comparative frailty in the face of unimaginable terrors, but with scares aplenty and a haunting score by Akira Yamaoka, *Silent Hill f* is a strong return to form. **MK**

The king of quality: up close and personal with luminary Martin Scorsese.

TV

MR. SCORSESE

MARTY SUPREME

★★★★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **5 OF 5**

DIRECTOR Rebecca Miller
PARTICIPANTS Martin Scorsese, Robert De Niro, Leonardo DiCaprio, Daniel Day-Lewis, Brian De Palma, Thelma Schoonmaker

PLOT After 27 feature films, legendary filmmaker Martin Scorsese sits down to reflect on his life, with collaborators and old friends weighing in.

"EVERY MAN HAS to go through hell to reach his paradise." Not our words, but the words of cigar-sucking maniac Max Cady in *Cape Fear*. And they apply, aptly, to the director of that 1991 thriller, as is proven in this phenomenal five-part documentary, so kinetic and compelling that it could be mistaken itself for a Martin Scorsese Picture.

Scorsese has — despite his current status as a pop-culture icon, part cuddly grandpa, part saint-like protector of cinema — been through it. He's battled it all, from cocaine addiction to blue spells to Harvey Weinstein. And just as his movies gaze unflinchingly at whatever worlds they chronicle, this "film portrait" by Rebecca Miller pushes into some raw places, an honest look at a complex man rather than the syrupy hagiography it could have been. Two people (Isabella Rossellini and Thelma Schoonmaker) refer separately to Scorsese as "a volcano"; we also hear how he furiously shoved Weinstein's desk out of a third-floor window while making *Gangs Of New York*, only to discover he'd got the wrong desk. The five-times-married director's tricky history with women is also probed, and Sharon Stone tells of the boys' club that was the *Casino* set, until she cornered Scorsese and told him he had to start talking to her.

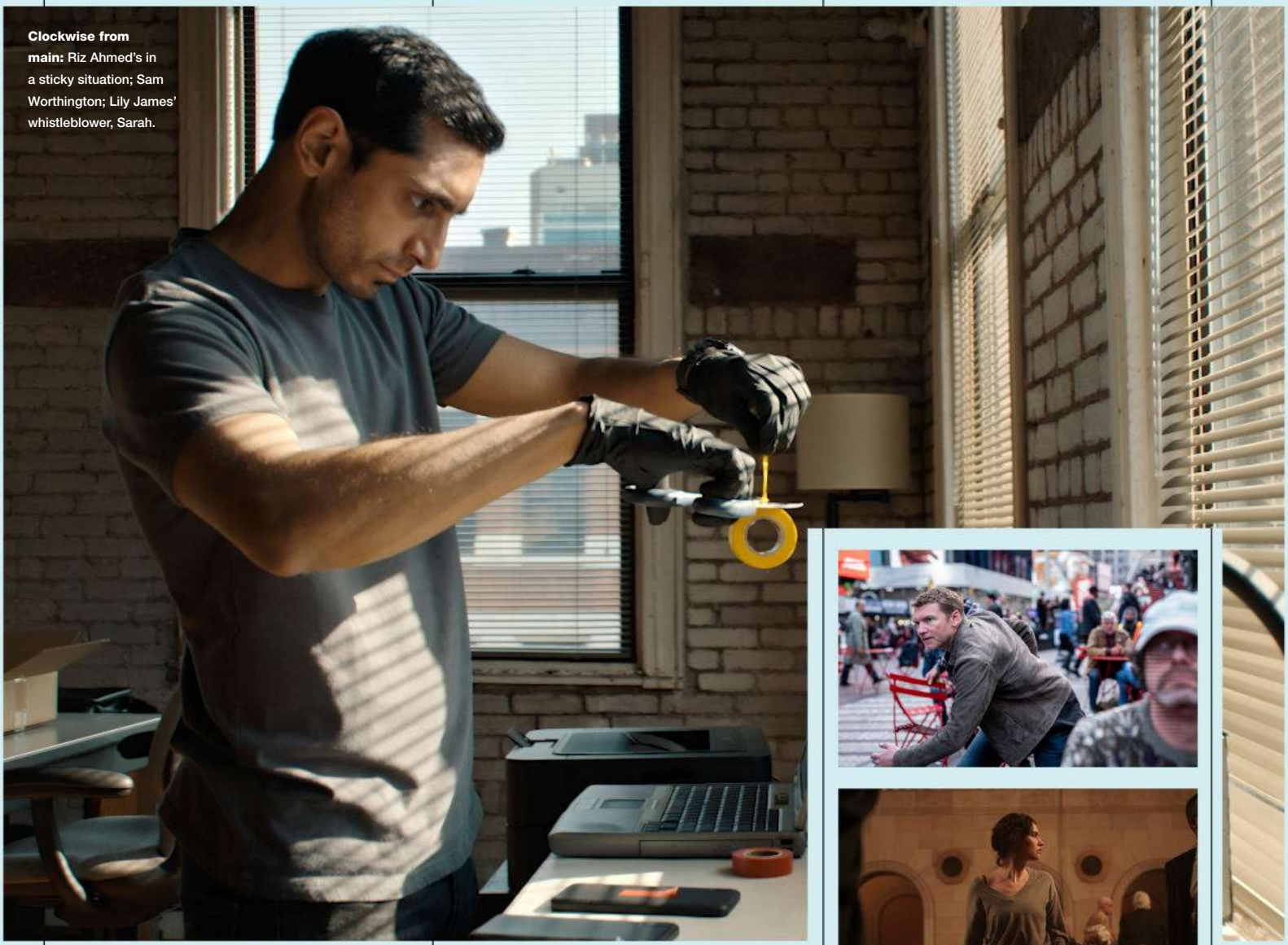
The brilliance of this doc is showing clearly how Scorsese has fed all that human frailty into his work. *Raging Bull*, a film that Steven Spielberg describes here as putting him into a catatonic state when he watched it, was fuelled by his crisis of faith. So affected was Scorsese by *Shutter Island*'s dark material that he had panic attacks making it. Here, we get the story of a man, not an icon. And the glimpses of his life away from soundstages are fascinating, like extremely affecting footage of him with Helen, his wife of 26 years, who has Parkinson's.

Miller's husband is Daniel Day-Lewis; he appears here (charmingly, he may be the only person on the planet to refer to Scorsese as "Martin"), talking about how *Taxi Driver* blew his mind. The access is, in fact, incredible across the board. You get the talking heads you might expect: Spielberg, De Niro, DiCaprio. But you also get Scorsese film-pals Ari Aster and Spike Lee ("What's his name? Rupert Pumpkin?"). And best of all, friends from his old neighbourhood, shooting the shit in what could be deleted scenes from *Mean Streets*. *Mr. Scorsese*'s biggest coup sees the man upon whom that classic's shit-stirrer Johnny Boy was based make a showing, despite De Niro having thought he was dead, and being as chaotic and hilarious as you'd hope. You can't keep a good mook down. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

VERDICT **Incisively making links between Scorsese's life and work, and letting its A-list guest stars tell wonderful stories, this is a smart, fast salute to a goodfella.**

WATCH FIRST

In 1974, a year after *Mean Streets*, Scorsese made *Italianamerican*: a hugely charming documentary about his parents. His mother Catherine's meatball recipe plays out over the end credits.



Clockwise from main: Riz Ahmed's in a sticky situation; Sam Worthington; Lily James' whistleblower, Sarah.

FILM

RELAY

THE FIX IS IN FOR RIZ

★★★

OUT **OCTOBER 31** / CERT **15** / **112 MINS**

DIRECTOR David Mackenzie
CAST Riz Ahmed, Lily James, Sam Worthington, Willa Fitzgerald

PLOT After getting caught up in a corporate scandal, Sarah (James) contacts a fixer, Ash (Ahmed). In order to protect her, Ash is forced to break his own rules.

IF THERE'S ONE thing clear from the off, it's that David Mackenzie's *Relay* has its sights firmly set on the paranoid thrillers of the '70s. Following Sarah (Lily James), a corporate worker looking to expose the questionable practices at the bioengineering company where she works, the opening plunges straight into the world of whistleblowing, with visuals that bring to mind genre classics like *The China Syndrome* and *The Conversation*. The twist is that once Sarah finds herself entangled with the wrong people, her only lifeline is a fixer, Riz Ahmed's Ash, who communicates exclusively through a relay service, a telephone system that allows people with hearing or speech impairments to talk to hearing people. Much of the story unfolds through a series of phone calls and low-key package drop-offs, creating a tension-filled story that zips along.

The relationship between these two very opposite characters is the heart of the film: Ash is methodical and tightly wound, with Sarah a more warm, thoughtful counterpoint. What's remarkable is how much Ahmed manages to communicate with so little dialogue. His performance begins icy and restrained, but as the layers peel back, we glimpse someone quietly — and ironically — yearning for connection. It's easy to see why Ash would be drawn to deer-in-the-headlights Sarah: even with the communication barrier between them, the pair sell this authentic relationship.

The script even gives its baddies some real personality, including a crew of capitalist goons hired to track Sarah down led by Sam Worthington's Dawson and Willa Fitzgerald's Rosetti. More highly skilled douchebags than your standard henchmen figures, they're genuine arseholes — boisterous, cunning and, at times, even a little funny. The standout sequence comes early at an airport, where many of the characters collide for the first time after Ash lures Sarah's pursuers into a trap, complete with over-the-top disguises and elaborate misdirection. This is where the film absolutely nails the '70s-thriller vibe, with Mackenzie and writer Justin Piasecki clearly having a blast revelling in the pastiche.

What holds *Relay* back is its inability to sustain that grounded tension into the third act. Carefully constructed scenes give way to a more conventional, *Bourne*-style action climax. When the bullets start flying, it's hard not to feel a little disheartened, knowing how strong the film was when maintaining its own deliberate pace. Plus there's a third-act reveal you'll probably guess at least 30 minutes before it arrives, and for all its talk of corrupt corporations, the conclusion feels a little too neat. Still, it's worth highlighting just how much the first two acts get right — even if the ending falters slightly, *Relay* remains a call worth taking. **HARRY STAINER**

VERDICT With Ahmed and James' connection holding it together, this is a tight, tense throwback to the paranoid thrillers of yesteryear that just about sticks the landing.

Grace (Jennifer Lawrence) and Jackson (Robert Pattinson), in the grip of primal instincts. **Below:** "Bold, unrelenting".

FILM

DIE MY LOVE

JENNIFER LAWRENCE'S MOTHERLODE

★★★★

OUT **NOVEMBER 14** / CERT **15** / **119 MINS**

DIRECTOR Lynne Ramsay
CAST Jennifer Lawrence, Robert Pattinson, Sissy Spacek, Nick Nolte, LaKeith Stanfield

PLOT After moving to the countryside to start a family with husband Jackson (Pattinson), Grace (Lawrence) suffers from postpartum psychosis.

THERE'S A FERAL ENERGY that courses through Lynne Ramsay's *Die My Love*. It's there right from the film's opening moments, when Jennifer Lawrence and Robert Pattinson's young and oh-so-in-love couple Grace and Jackson crawl through tall grass like a pair of lions hunting for a vulnerable gazelle to chew on. In Ramsay's explosive adaptation of the 2012 novel by Argentine writer Ariana Harwicz, these two characters are hungry. Hungry for love, hungry for sex — and when the couple move to his uncle's rickety, remote house, they're hungry for their lives to begin.

They soon have a baby, and the drastic change seems to reduce Grace to the most primal of instincts: feed, change nappies, sleep. She has ambitions to write a novel, he hopes to record an album, but neither of those dreams materialise. Instead, Grace psychologically unravels, and her base self takes over once again. She dances in her underwear, stalks around her home with a knife in hand, and masturbates when there's nothing else to do. All of that wide-open space that she calls home — which Ramsay captures in the tight, claustrophobic Academy ratio — may as well be a four-walled prison.

Grace doesn't fit so easily into the mould of a mother, but Ramsay remains unjudgemental throughout, situating the viewer directly within Grace's inner torment. The director and cinematographer Seamus McGarvey (who

previously collaborated with Ramsay on 2011's *We Need To Talk About Kevin*) depict that conflict in a hazy blend of reality and surrealism, intimacy and maximalism.

With just five films over an extraordinary two-decade-long career, Ramsay reaffirms herself as one of our foremost observers of humanity. Her vibrant, immersive portraits of complex people, like Tilda Swinton's destabilised mother in *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, have always been deeply immersive, more interested in swimming in the mood and psychology of their characters than they are overly fixated on a linear plot. *Die My Love* operates in the same way — so much so that it perhaps gets a little lost in its own turbulent dream-state.

Still, it is always incredibly arresting, elevated by Jennifer Lawrence in a no-holds-barred performance that sees her lose all inhibition. The actor takes on a carnal physicality unlike anything she's embodied before, and it doesn't feel as if she's acting so much as allowing the character's spirit to take hold of her. Pattinson, who's no stranger to exploring the farthest extremes of himself on screen, is right there with her as Grace's increasingly distant husband. But this film belongs to Lawrence, devoting every inch of her body to a bold, unrelenting and invigorating study of just how unforgiving motherhood can be. **IANA MURRAY**

VERDICT **Lynne Ramsay's raw and animalistic character study proves to be the perfect vehicle for Jennifer Lawrence. She's never been better as a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown.**

also out

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SLOW HORSES: SEASON 5

★★★ TV

"These six episodes are packed with action, dry wit and the odd burst of Jackson Lamb flatulence. It remains a lot of fun, one of the freshest dramas on TV, despite those farts. But this particular batch doesn't quite hit the heights of previous ones." **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

THE STRANGERS: CHAPTER 2

★★ FILM

"The storytelling makes hardly a lick of sense. At once explaining too much and not enough, this middle segment of the trilogy fails to amp up the stranger danger. Perhaps the scariest thing is the end title: 'To be continued…'" **JAMIE GRAHAM**

WAYWARD

★★★ TV

"Come for the cult, stay for the teen drama. It may lack edge-of-your-seat thrills, but this show's abundance of ideas and big heart make it a weekend binge that's hard to pass up." **HARRY STAINER**

ALL OF YOU

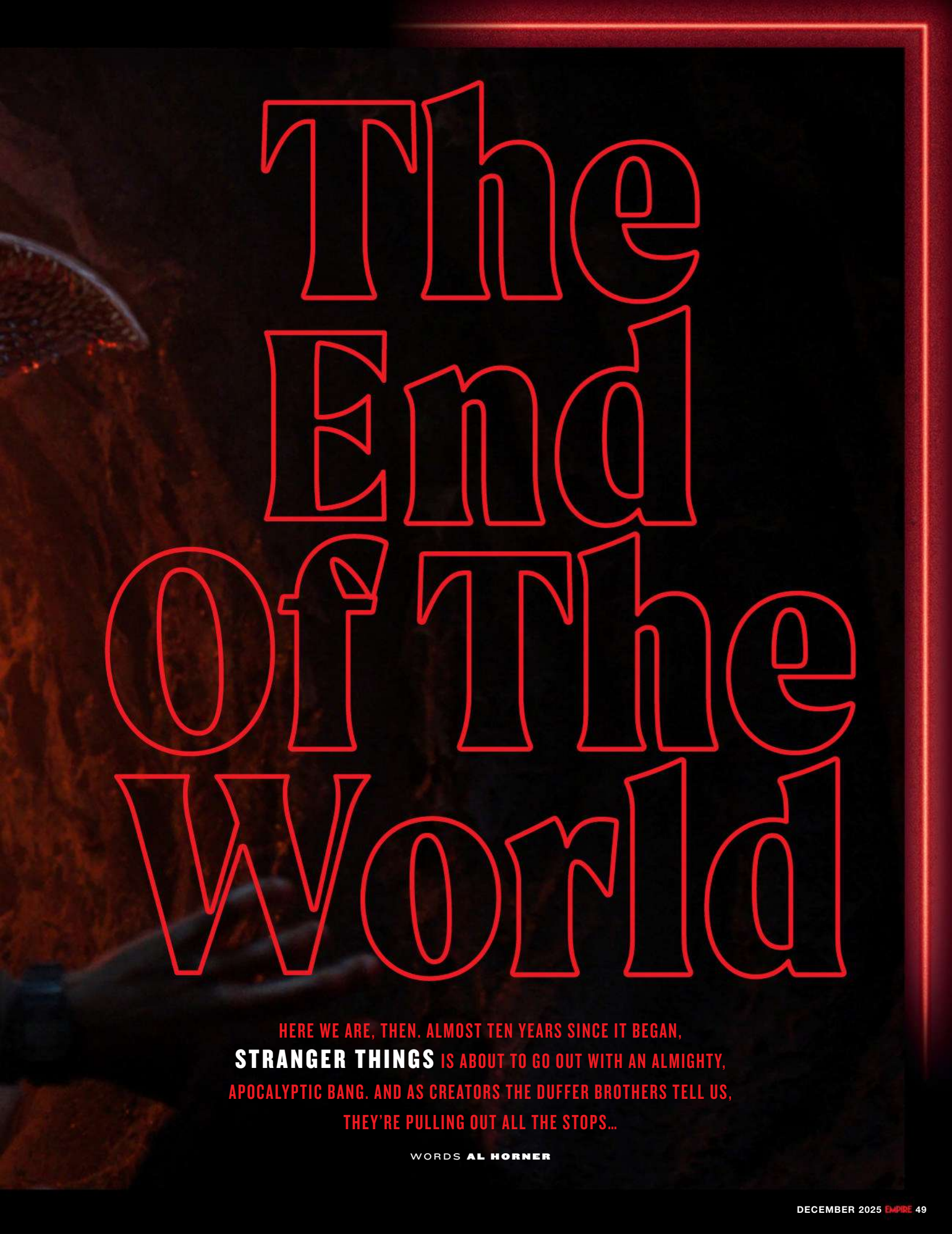
★★★ FILM

"Part weepy, part tragicomedy, part adulterous romance. Brett Goldstein and Imogen Poots have an easy, effortless chemistry — the kind of friends who give each other shit, complain about being grown-ups, and affectionately greet each other with, 'Hello, dickhead!'" **JOHN NUGENT**

TASK

★★★★ TV

"You've seen this kind of show before, probably many times — but its compelling characters, patient writing and undercurrent of emotion help it stand out from the crowd." **SOPHIE BUTCHER**



The End Of The World

HERE WE ARE, THEN. ALMOST TEN YEARS SINCE IT BEGAN, **STRANGER THINGS** IS ABOUT TO GO OUT WITH AN ALMIGHTY, APOCALYPTIC BANG. AND AS CREATORS THE DUFFER BROTHERS TELL US, THEY'RE PULLING OUT ALL THE STOPS…

WORDS **AL HORNER**

Ross and Matt Duffer are deep inside the Upside Down.

"Please God, no more spores!" begs Matt, as he and his brother — the creators of *Stranger Things* — contemplate the remaining items on their to-do list for the day. Dusk is drawing near as *Empire* meets the twins on a sweltering Friday afternoon inside their LA post-production HQ. Outside, traffic is building as people leave their offices and begin their commutes home — a city winding down for the weekend. But the Duffers wouldn't know much about that. Sixty-eight days from now, volume one of the show's fifth and final season will hit screens. In 103 days, its last-ever episode will air, drawing to an end nine years of inter-dimensional terror, telekinetic chaos and coming-of-age adventure in a town named Hawkins, Indiana. Like the cracked grandfather clock in a Vecna vision, time is ticking to get episodes over the finish line, and the brothers are battling to remain on schedule.

There are hours of VFX shots still to review before they leave tonight, each of which needs to be perfect. Every drop of drool from the fangs of a snarling Demogorgon. Every lightning-strike across a scorched-red sky. And yes, to Matt's despair, every computer-generated dust particle, drifting through the deathly atmosphere of the show's spooky world-between-worlds. "Honestly, you wouldn't believe the amount of time spent looking at spores in the Upside Down," laughs Ross. The workload is gruelling — but that's just what it takes to create "the biggest, most intense season of the show yet", as Matt puts it, unlocking all remaining mysteries at the heart of the series, and bringing to a close one of the biggest TV behemoths of the century so far.

Need proof of its enormity? It's everywhere you look here in the Duffers' Season 5 nerve-centre. On every wall and in every corner are reminders of the show's Mind Flayer-sized pop-cultural empire. On your right as you enter is a five-foot-tall Funko Pop statue of Eleven, the show's bloody-nosed, super-powered hero, played by Millie Bobby Brown. Adorning random shelves around the space are official *Stranger Things* LEGO sets, toys, clothes and neon signs. Were *Empire* allowed a peek inside some of the rooms with their doors closed, we might have found one of its 12 Emmy Awards, keepsakes from its award-winning West End spin-off stage show, and gushing letters from famous fans like Steven Spielberg and Stephen King.

But those doors are closed for a reason. Inside, colleagues working on edits and colour-grades guard spoilers that will remain under tighter lock-and-key than the vaults at Hawkins National Laboratory 'til New Year's Eve — the day of that last ever episode. "Now we're in the final season, we don't have to hold anything back. So we reveal more-or-less everything as it relates to the Upside Down. Exactly what it is. Exactly how it came to be," teases Matt. "The goal was to end the story of Mike, Lucas, Will, Dustin..." adds Ross, trailing off. "All the characters that we've met through the show so far. We didn't want to tie everything into a perfect bow, but I think we answer most questions and resolve every arc. It was our intention to write a definitive ending to this story."

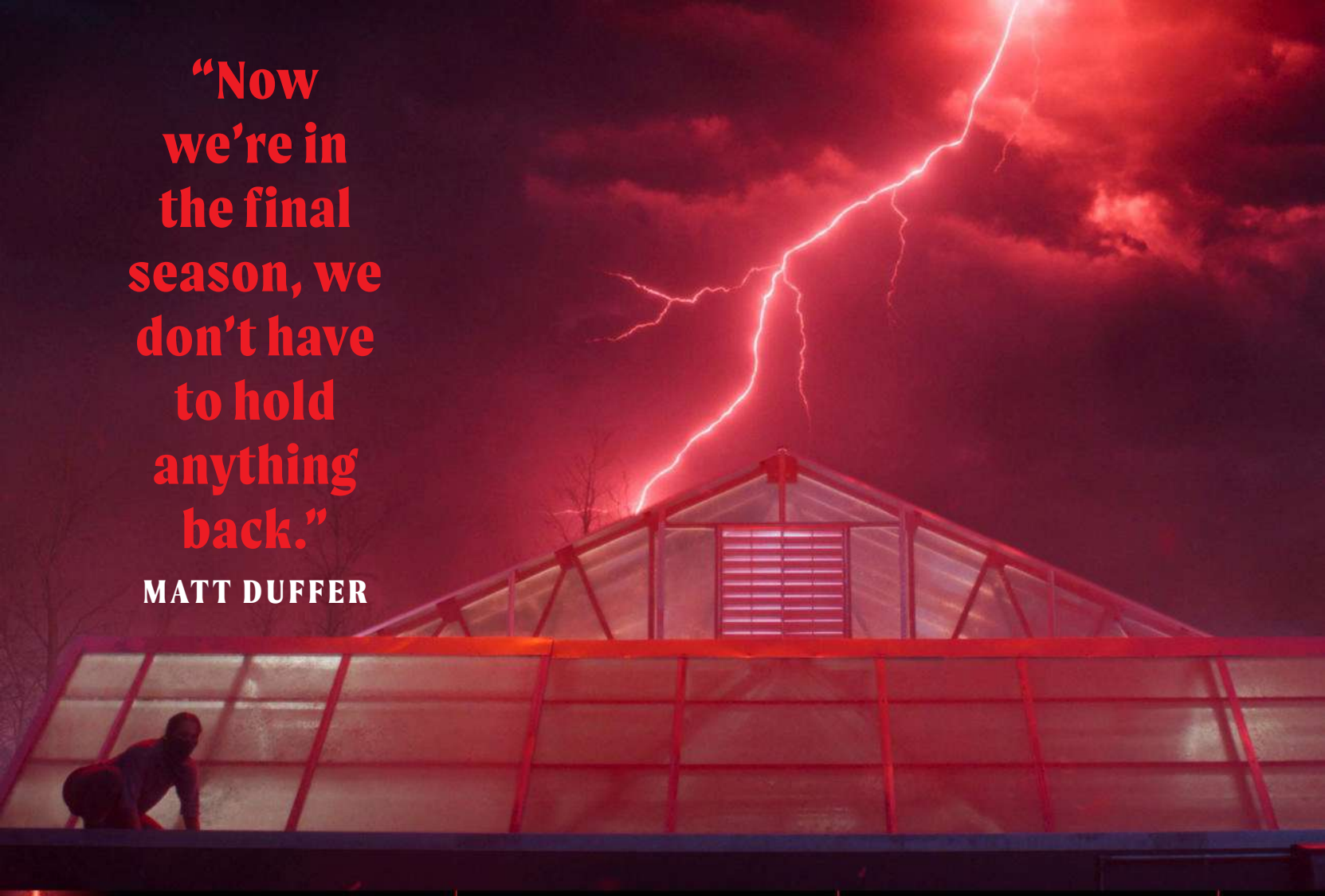
The origin of the Upside Down. Which characters make it out alive. Who dies at the horrifying hands of the show's Freddy Krueger-ish villain, Vecna. And what a portal to a nightmare dimension rupturing on your doorstep, as happened at the end of Season 4, means for the profit margins of the town's premier ice-cream parlour, Scoops Ahoy. The

Clockwise from main: David Harbour, Millie Bobby Brown and Alex Breaux mid-scene; The Duffer brothers, Matt and Ross, on location; BFFs Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo), Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin) and Will (Noah Schnapp); Will comes over all Hulk-y; Vecna (Jamie Campbell Bower) heats up; Eleven (Brown) flying high.

answers to all these questions (okay, except the last one) await in a batch of episodes the pair insist is "three times the scale" of the show's previous outing. Which, lest we forget, featured helicopters ripped from the sky in fireballs of telekinetic fury, prison brawls with Demogorgons and a visit to a terrifying new shadow realm, nicknamed Dimension X by fans.

Each episode in Season 4 cost a reported $30 million, with a final one that clocked in at two-and-a-half hours long. And yet, without giving away this season's runtimes or overall budget, the Duffers promise Season 5 is even vaster. "When we pitched it to Netflix, we genuinely thought the scale was going to be about on par with Season 4," Matt grins. "But, uh... that turned out to be a lie." In other words, the last season of *Stranger Things* was big. But this one goes to Eleven.

"We thought, 'We get to do this one last time,'" recalls Ross. "So..." He pauses. "What did we want to do?" ›



"Now we're in the final season, we don't have to hold anything back."

MATT DUFFER

When viewers last visited Hawkins in 2022, things ended on a note of utter doom. Sure, Eleven and the found-family she first met in Season 1 — Mike, Will, Dustin and Lucas, played respectively by Finn Wolfhard, Noah Schnapp, Gaten Matarazzo and Caleb McLaughlin — had ultimately saved the day. Vecna (Jamie Campbell Bower) — the big-bad the show had been building towards since 2016 — had been defeated, at least for now. But Max (Sadie Sink) had been sunk into a coma, and giant fractures in the Earth beneath the town had torn open, allowing the Upside Down to invade. The season ended with a literal storm on the horizon, clouds of red and black closing in.

Season 5 picks up in the aftermath of those events, with the American military desperately trying to force the Demogenie back in the Demobottle. Police Chief Hopper (David Harbour) and co's hometown has been quarantined — a plot point the Duffers decided upon because "we really wanted this entire season to take place in Hawkins", says Matt. "We didn't want any of our characters leaving. It's scary because we knew things were going to get pretty intense and that at a certain point, people in the town were going to want to flee. But they can't. They're trapped."

Bracing herself for the huge threats to come, Eleven — still on the run from authorities, despite the recent death of the man who moulded her, government agent Dr Brenner (Matthew Modine) — "has been in training when we meet her", reveals Ross. "She's not suddenly like Neo or Superman, flying through the sky, but she's definitely stronger now." Matt concurs: "She has better control over her powers and can use them in more innovative ways. The closest example, I'd say, is probably the Force."

It's just as well she's levelled up her powers. When Vecna returns in Season 5, he's no longer the strictly psychic foe the gang faced last time, warns Matt. "We've been calling him Vecna 2.0, because he's changed. He's stronger and scarier than ever, with new real-world abilities. In Season 4, he was deadly because he could infiltrate your mind and manipulate you in that manner. Now he can kick your ass in truly violent ways, like Freddy on steroids," he laughs.

There are inter-personal problems within the group to overcome, too. The season begins with our heroes on a quest to find Vecna, hiding somewhere in the Upside Down. But not everyone is 100 per cent focused on that hunt. "Dustin is struggling because of what happened to Eddie," says Ross, nodding to Season 4's late, great guitar-solo-shredding hero Eddie Munson, played by Joseph Quinn. Wracked by grief, he's torn between the mission and "this desire to be defiant and to stand up for what Eddie believed in" — leading to challenges in his relationship with Joe Keery's Steve Harrington in particular. "Dustin's always the one that can bring the party together and keep everyone aligned. It's pretty destabilising to not have him be able to fill that role."

All roads lead to some giant battles. "Episode 4 and Episode 8 are just *monsters*," beams Matt. *Game Of Thrones* was a major influence on these clashes, with one huge fight aiming to "evoke the same feeling" as the fantasy epic's Battle Of The Bastards, he reveals. But there are moments of more claustrophobic tension too. In one scene, the Duffers re-enact "the raptors in the kitchen from *Jurassic Park*" but with Demodogs — a moment of nail-biting horror involving Lucas and Max. Elsewhere, "*Home Alone* plays a huge part in one of the episodes," Matt teases once more. "The spirit of *Home Alone* and the climax of *Home Alone*." A showdown with Wet Bandits from the Upside Down? "Something like that, yeah," he laughs.

If all this sounds like a huge undertaking to you, well, that's because it was. Season 5 — shot once more in Atlanta, Georgia — took almost a year to film, and the production was punishing. The duo are still recovering from the making of one episode, 'Sorcerer' — "the most logistically insane shoot of our lives", as they describe it. "There were so many moments where everyone was like, 'Can this *please* end?' Everyone was exhausted. Everyone was fatigued," admits Ross.

That fatigue is in part what inspired the Duffers to end the show after five seasons, having had just nine weeks off in a decade by Matt's count. "You collapse at the end of [each season] and then you pick yourself up and you go again," he sighs. "We're writing. We're editing. We're directing. At a certain point, that's not sustainable. So yeah, we did fry ourselves out."

Luckily, the Duffers had help on hand to ensure they didn't fry out before the finish line this time. Because if *Stranger Things* has taught us anything, it's that epic fights are best fought not alone, but with friends by your side.

Clockwise from main: An electrifying moment for Eleven; McLaughlin in action; Demogorgon ahoy!; Linda Hamilton joins the cast as Dr Kay.

The Duffers still can't believe he said yes. That the director of one of the most universally loved films in modern movie history, absent from Hollywood for 11 years, stepped out of retirement to helm two episodes of Season 5. Until 2023, *Prey* filmmaker Dan Trachtenberg had been due to helm a couple, alongside long-time collaborators of the show, Pixar legend Andrew Stanton and *Deadpool & Wolverine* director Shawn Levy. Then the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes hit and shooting schedules shifted around. Trachtenberg had to drop out, at which point, the Duffers sent out a Hail Mary. Having met for lunch a few months earlier, the pair emailed Frank Darabont, director of *The Shawshank Redemption*. And, it turns out, a *Stranger Things* devotee.

"Our initial thought was that it's impossible," smiles Matt. "He told us in the meeting he had no interest in making anything ever again. He's done. But we decided the worst that could happen was that he says no and we feel a little bit embarrassed." Instead, Darabont leapt at the chance, signing on to shoot Episodes 3 and 5. The Duffers can't wait for audiences to see them. And they may well take our characters to harrowing places. "*The Mist* has the darkest ending of all time. I can't think of a darker ending," Matt says of Darabont's last movie before retirement — a 2007 tale of a portal to another dimension opening in small-town America, unleashing all manner of slimy creatures with a taste for flesh who promptly overrun an inept military. Sound familiar?

Darabont wasn't the only big gun brought aboard for these new episodes. Did we mention that on the gang's heels this season is a new human adversary, played by an icon of 1980s cinema? Having cast *The Goonies*' Sean Astin and *Nightmare On Elm Street*'s Robert Englund in previous seasons, this time the Duffers invited Linda Hamilton — Sarah Connor herself — to step into the fray. *The Terminator* star plays Dr Kay — a government agent heading up the hunt for Eleven as she continues to evade capture. "She's hyper-intelligent and intimidating," explains Matt of the character. "She's a scientist but if she needs to, she can get into a fight and shoot a gun."

But, c'mon. This is *Stranger Things* we're talking about. All adult collaborators, at the end of the day, must share second-billing next to the young stars who for a decade have formed the heartbeat of the show. The Duffers haven't just worked with the likes of Millie Bobby Brown and Finn Wolfhard for ten years — they've watched them grow up too. Making each goodbye — every character's final scene to shoot — deeply emotional. This show "was our entire thirties — a quarter of our lives", says Ross. "But for most of our cast, it was half their lives." Were there tears? "Oh God, yeah. Every time I thought I was going to be okay," says Matt. "And every time, I was not."

Friends don't lie. Brothers, on the other hand? Give two twins from North Carolina a chance and they'll weave one hell of a fiction. A story about a telekinetic girl and her outcast friends, inspired by their own childhood. "Middle school was a very joyful experience for us," Ross remembers. "We had a group of friends who we'd play Magic: The Gathering with and make movies with on the weekend. We'd go out into the woods and walk the train tracks. Life just felt like this huge adventure." High school, however, "was a much harder period for us. We felt really invisible, and just sort of left behind." Two introverts in a town full of basketball fanatics, "we just wanted to be away from everyone," says Matt — "to retreat into our fantasy world". That they did. And changed TV, perhaps forever.

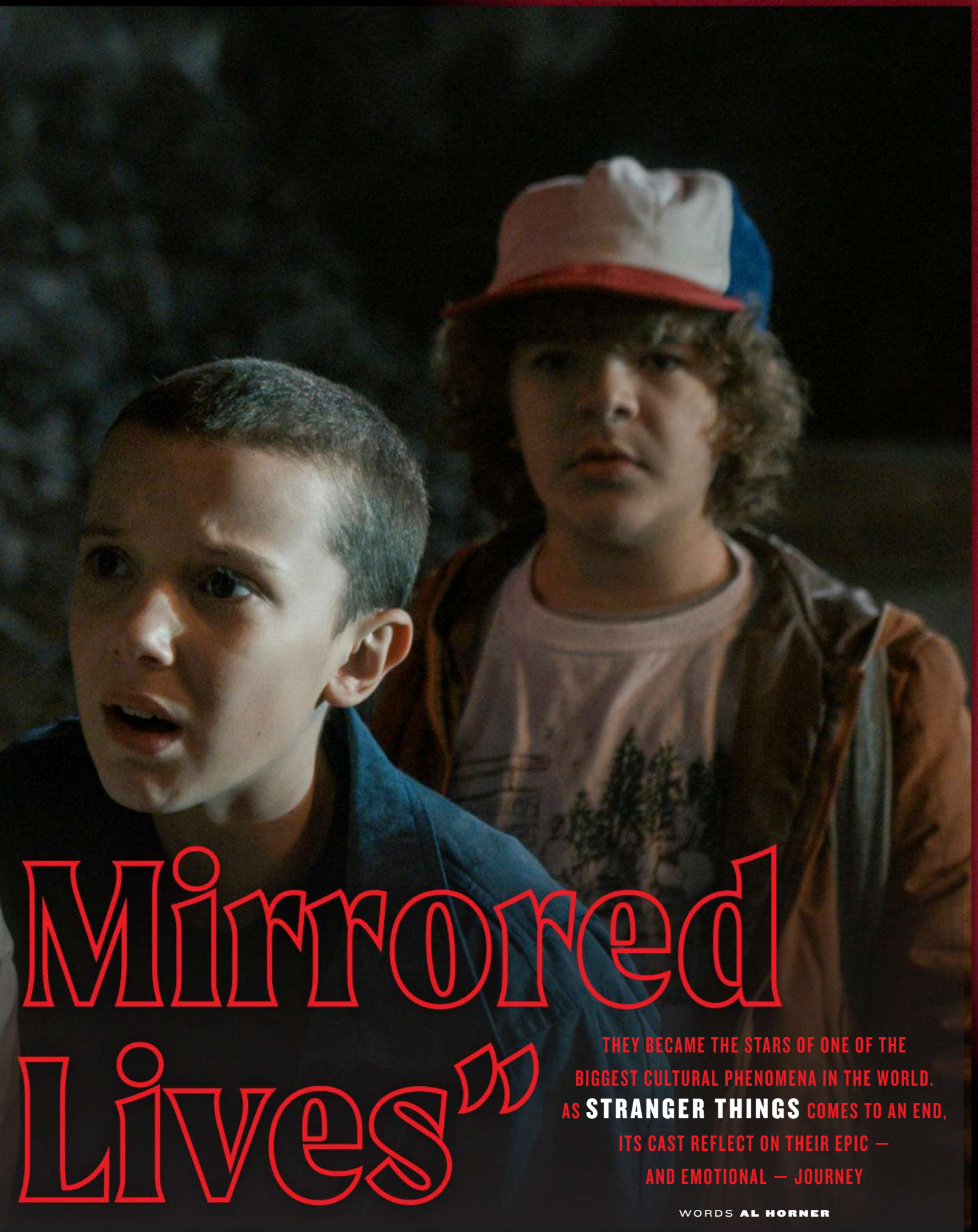
By the door as you exit the Duffers' office, is a road sign that reads: "Leaving Hawkins, Indiana." Someday soon, when each lightning flash, each drop of demogorgon drool and every spore — those goddamn spores — is perfected, they'll finally be finished. And on that day, they'll pass that sign as they lock up for the night, and those words will take on new meaning. *Leaving* Hawkins, Indiana? The Duffer brothers will have officially left. "It'll be hard waking up [on New Year's Day] and realising we don't have another season to make," says Ross. "For the past ten years, our lives have been consumed by this story and these characters. It's time to leave it behind — but it's not going to be easy to let it go."

Not that they'll have to let it go altogether. Earlier this summer, the Duffers signed a deal to produce films for Paramount, ending a decade-long association with Netflix. Matt reveals that they'll still be able to partner with the streaming service to produce spin-offs, however, and "hope to find a way to continue to expand the world of *Stranger Things*. It feels like this book is closed. But maybe there's another book that will be just as cool, waiting to be opened".

Until then, with this set of characters at least, they get to do this one last time. Can Season 5 deliver even bigger thrills than past seasons of their game-changing sci-fi epic? Can Ross and Matt Duffer stick the landing on the dense, moving mythology they've spent a decade crafting? Hey, *Stranger Things* have happened. They really, truly have.

***STRANGER THINGS* SEASON 5 IS ON NETFLIX FROM NOVEMBER 27**

"The Show Our Actual



Mirrored Lives”

THEY BECAME THE STARS OF ONE OF THE BIGGEST CULTURAL PHENOMENA IN THE WORLD. AS **STRANGER THINGS** COMES TO AN END, ITS CAST REFLECT ON THEIR EPIC — AND EMOTIONAL — JOURNEY

WORDS **AL HORNER**

Growing up is hard. Growing up with a broken barrier to protect, between our realm and one overspilling with Lovecraftian horrors? That's even harder, as the young heroes of *Stranger Things* have found out across four (soon-to-be five) frantic seasons. At times, starring as those characters hasn't been much easier. The day the show debuted on Netflix in July 2016, Millie Bobby Brown — then just 12 years old — was on a road trip with her family, driving from LA to Palm Springs. "I fell asleep on the car ride, and when I fell asleep I had 25 followers [on

Clockwise from main: Monsterbusters: Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo), Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Will (Noah Schnapp) and Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin); Action!; Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) uses her psychic powers; Joyce (Winona Ryder), Jonathan (Charlie Heaton) and Nancy (Natalia Dyer) wait in hope; Sealing up the portal; Exec producer/director Shawn Levy (left) with David Harbour (Jim Hopper) on set; Filming Will in the Upside Down.

Instagram]. When I woke up, I had closer to a million," the actor behind Eleven laughs. "When I left LA, no-one knew who I was. When we arrived, I couldn't sit by the pool [without people approaching]. That was the moment where I was like, 'I don't think this is going away.'"

The show became the first true smash of the streaming era, catapulting its cast into instant megastardom. Talk-show appearances beckoned. Those follower counts continued to rise. But with all this excitement came darkness and confusion. "There was a lot of me questioning myself at a really young age because of criticism from the world," recalls Brown. "It could be super scary," agrees Finn Wolfhard (Eleven's boyfriend Mike), who also describes being sent into a tailspin by suddenly becoming an international household name.

Thankfully, behind the scenes, an alliance was forming. Stronger than the Hellfire Club. Unbreakable even by Vecna (Jamie Campbell Bower), the show's big bad. This is the story of how *Stranger Things* became the biggest show in the world, turning its cast's lives upside down. And how, just like their Demogorgon-duelling counterparts on-screen, they leaned on each other to survive...

Strange Beginnings

Matt and Ross Duffer approach Netflix with an idea for a show: Denis Villeneuve's Prisoners *with a supernatural twist. With the streamer on board, the search begins for their child cast...*

Millie Bobby Brown (Eleven): It must have been June or July [2015] when I screen-tested. They flew me from London to LA and my seat number on the flight was 11. Then the floor of the hotel I was staying in was 11... It felt like a sign.
Gaten Matarazzo (Dustin): The original name of the show was 'Montauk'. I think all of us probably read for Mike. But there was also a scene with the boys all together in Mike's basement, to see how we'd banter with each other, and I just fell into being Dustin.
Noah Schnapp (Will): Did the Duffers warn me how rough my character's journey was going to be when I read for him? No! That would have been nice! I was just told, "You're not going to be in Season 1 much. But prepare yourself for Season 2. You're going to have a big role, so just sit tight and be patient."
Brown: I walked in the room to read for Eleven, and there was [producer] Shawn Levy, the Duffers and, gosh, I don't remember who else. I know that Finn was there and that he looked like he was about to throw up — he was *very* pale. (*Laughs*) They gave me a cardboard box of clothes and were like, "Do whatever you feel like with this box of clothes — but try to imagine that you don't know what clothes are. You've never been exposed to them." I was like, "What the hell is this weird acting exercise?!" I didn't know that *was* the character. I didn't know anything about Eleven. I didn't even know she had powers. They did ask how I'd feel about shaving my head...
Caleb McLaughlin (Lucas): I remember thinking Lucas was so sure and confident in himself. He was this kid figuring out the world, looking for acceptance, like any teenager. There was something relatable.
Brown: The next morning after the audition, the Duffers called. They said, "Millie, would you like to be our Eleven?" and I just fell on the floor. Then two or three months later, we moved to Atlanta — and my hair was gone."

Entering Hawkins

Season 1 begins production, telling the tale of a group of pre-teen Dungeons & Dragons *players whose friend Will vanishes. But saving him doesn't mean the cast don't still have to do their homework...*

Schnapp: There was a school trailer on set, which we all grew up going back and forth to. You'd be in two different worlds on the same day, with multiple switches a day.
Finn Wolfhard (Mike): Fighting a Demogorgon then going and learning math is not a normal thing. It's not a normal childhood in any regard.
McLaughlin: We all really just loved each other from the beginning. We weren't forcing a relationship to help the show — we didn't have to. We'd play video games and eat dinner and have sleepovers. It was really fun.
Matarazzo: The show was scary, but shooting it wasn't. I mean, the Demogorgon was just a guy in a suit called Mark. (*Laughs*) I remember once going to watch the scene being filmed with Barb in the pool, getting taken in the Upside Down — probably one of the scariest scenes in the show. Mark is crawling towards her. Shannon [Purser, who played Barb] is freaking out and screaming. Then they cut and someone goes, "Hey, Mark?" Then this Demogorgon replies (*comically normal voice*), "Uh, yeah?" And I remember just thinking that was the funniest thing ever.
Brown: David [Harbour, who plays Hopper] and I connected on another level. He always looked out for me and I always annoyed him like a daughter or a younger sister. I was always trying to climb all over him and he was always rolling his eyes and laughing at me. I think that's kind of how the El and Hopper relationship really started to develop in the show — it was mirroring our actual lives and our actual relationship.
Wolfhard: I realised quickly there was ›

a real message in the show about loyalty — about finding your people, your group, your squad. The people you'd go into battle with. Even if you feel like an outsider, you can find friends, even on the outside, who look at the world similarly. When you find those people, you have to appreciate them. Even when the show is at its highest level, its highest stakes, it all comes back to that message.

Blowing Up

When it arrives on Netflix, the show becomes a ratings phenomenon, influencing everything from pop music to high-street fashion. Its stars are somewhat blindsided.

Wolfhard: I thought the show was going to be a cult classic. I really had my expectations on the ground, because I didn't want to get disappointed. The stuff that I liked at the time was outsider stuff. And I *loved* this. So that's kinda the reaction I expected. What I definitely didn't expect was the whole overnight thing. By Season 2, we had an ad at the Super Bowl. It was insane.

Brown: I don't think there's a feeling like it — the spotlight of being in a show like *Stranger Things*. But with other shows, you'd be on your own. I was lucky. I had five other kids who I got to call up and rely on, who I could ask, "Do you find this really weird, too?" And then I also had someone like Winona [Ryder, who plays Joyce Byers]. She's been in the limelight and understands what it's like. I had a number to call for every feeling I was feeling. I was the luckiest girl in the world to have that.

Wolfhard: We would not have been able to make it through the way we did without each other. None of us were super-professional actors. Caleb and Gaten had done theatre, but this was not something they were used to, either. We were just these super-weird kids that were put together, so we confided in each other. And I think you can see that on screen, as the show goes on.

Expanding The Upside Down

As Seasons 2 and 3 hit Netflix, the show gets bigger in scale and more mature in tone. Will is back from the Upside Down, but darker threats are drawing in.

Wolfhard: I remember Season 2 being very anticipated, because of the first season — how much it kind of blew up. We were all super-antsy to see what the show would now be. And I remember being pretty taken by the jump in budget, from what we had in the first season to the second season. Even shooting the first two episodes, when we were trick-or-treating for Halloween, I was like, "We just shut down a whole street?!'" We had this whole neighbourhood to ourselves in Atlanta to film in, whereas before it'd be a square block and traffic would be waiting. Then each year it just got bigger and bigger.

Schnapp: There was a new monster in Season 2 — the Mind Flayer. I remember asking the Duffers on the first day, "What am I working with here?" because I hadn't seen it. With each new terror, they would show us a piece of concept art so we could imagine it. But in reality, it'd be like a big beach ball that

Clockwise from main: Eleven in the grip of Vecna (Jamie Campbell Bower); Dr Sam Owens (Paul Reiser), Hopper, Bob (Sean Astin), Joyce and Mike look on in horror; Stranger things are afoot; Robin (Maya Hawke) makes it clear; The Duffers with Priah Ferguson (Erica).

we were fighting against. The Battle Of Starcourt in Season 3 was just us throwing fireworks at a beach ball in the middle of a mall.

Wolfhard: The show is really good at capturing the ages that our characters were going through. As you grow older, you learn that life does sometimes get dark. It can be scary and it can be really sad. The show is about a bunch of kids fighting monsters. But it's also about those growing pains. The real problems kids experience.

McLaughlin: In Season 1, the bullies called Lucas 'Midnight' (*a racist remark about his skin colour*). In Season 2, Billy [a new villain, played by Dacre Montgomery] says about my character, "There are certain kinds of people you shouldn't be hanging out with." The show went there, which was very important. That was the reality for a lot of minorities in the 1980s and even now. The Duffers brought it to a fantasy world, but this is real life. We needed to go in depth on how that would feel for Lucas.

A New Threat Rises

Season 4 arrives in 2022, as the show begins its endgame. Challenging Eleven and the gang this time is the mastermind behind all the violence so far...

Jamie Campbell Bower (Vecna): I did two auditions, then Matt and Ross Duffer called me in for a meeting in LA. For three days, to get ready, I started to build a kind of "mind map" of who Vecna might be, without being told who this person was. Doug Bradley (*Pinhead in the* Hellraiser *films*) and Ralph Fiennes as Voldemort were obviously key visual references. But in terms of building the inner world of the character, I put these visual cues up all around my flat. Pictures of burning houses. Pictures of lonely, isolated, dark rooms. It was about building a memory and an image I could consistently bring myself back to. There were pictures of spiders in my living room and all over my bedroom. I actually made marks on the wall of the rented accommodation I was in, which I still feel terrible about. I texted the lovely lady I rented the house from on my last day being, like, "Sorry!" Thankfully I didn't have flatmates at the time.

McLaughlin: No-one else could play Vecna as well as Jamie. Sometimes villains on screen can be full of cliché, but the way his lines are written, his backstory, his costume, his mannerisms, his voice, the way Jamie carries it all... it's a whole package. I think that's why Vecna's effective. He's a layered character. And there's a reason why he wants revenge. The Season 4 attic sequence facing him (*in which Lucas' girlfriend Max, played by Sadie Sink, takes on Vecna, while* ›

TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN #1

How Barb's untimely exit broke our hearts

Remember the biggest outcry of 2016? No, not the EU referendum. Not Donald Trump's defeat of Hillary Clinton at the US polls, either. "It was pretty wild," smiles Shannon Purser, recalling #JusticeForBarb — that year's *real* biggest outpouring of internet fury. The 28-year-old played Barb Holland, who, three episodes into *Stranger Things*' first season, met her Demogorgon-induced demise after being abandoned by best friend Nancy (Natalia Dyer) at a late-night pool party. "Some people were really upset and angry about it. I remember John Stamos tweeting about it, which is when I was like, 'Wow, I've made it!'"

Purser remembers her demise well. "They built this entire set just for my death scene. Which, as a first-time actress, just blew my mind. Like, 'All this for me?!'" she laughs. "We shot it in this empty pool and there were these gross, slimy vines everywhere. The majority of the day was me covered in slime, coughing up baby food and screaming."

The brutality of her death enraged social media. Petitions circulated for her character to be reinstated, causing the Duffers to announce that, while Season 2 wouldn't resurrect Barb from the Upside Down, it would definitely honour her. "I totally agreed with the brothers and their reasoning [to kill me]," Purser tells *Empire*. "There had to be some amount of high stakes or it wasn't going to feel scary. It had to be established that people can and will die. So it was actually an honour to be one of the first ones to go." Gone but not forgotten, Barb, gone but not forgotten.

TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN #2

How Kate Bush sent the show stratospheric

The idea came to them not while running up a hill, but while reading up on health. "We were researching people in comas and learning how music can reach them," says Ross Duffer, remembering the origins of one of *Stranger Things*' most zeitgeist-defining moments: Max's Kate Bush moment in Season 4. Haunted by the loss of her brother Billy in Season 3, Max is caught in a trance by Vecna. Her body rises into the air and it looks like the villain has found his next victim. That is, until the sound of a 1980s anthem brings her back to her friends.

"It was all based in real-life science and the power of music," continues Ross. He and Matt faced one major obstacle. It "had to be" 1985's 'Running Up That Hill' — but Bush famously rarely ever licenses her music to Hollywood. Luckily, it turned out the star was a *Stranger Things* fan. "I love it too!" she wrote on her website in the aftermath of the episode, marvelling at how the show had given the song "a whole new lease of life".

She could say that again. In the weeks after Season 4 hit Netflix, 'Running Up That Hill' topped the Apple Music charts in America, reaching the top ten in 34 countries. "It kind of opened the floodgates," laughs Matt, describing how they've since had "pretty big artists reaching out", trying to get their songs into Season 5. "We owe it all to Kate. The scene wouldn't have been the same without her."

Lucas fights a high-school bully) is a memory that will stay in my brain forever. It was really draining. A week of stunts and crying. I was really pushed to the limit — we all were.

Bower: Vecna was a human. Vecna was a child. Vecna was a boy who felt like he could never fit in anywhere. He was quite a lonely figure to me — this very sad boy who really only needed to be cared for. You'll see more in Season 5, so I'm hesitant to say too much. But from the pain he'd suffered, he wanted to create a better world. Or what he envisaged as a better world...

Saying Goodbye

Putting together the show's final season isn't just a huge filmmaking challenge — it's an emotional challenge like nothing the cast have faced before.

Brown: I'm feeling relatively calm right now but it definitely hit me on set. The morning I walked in on my last day, I immediately started crying. In most of the scenes I did that last day, they had to ask me to please stop crying. But I couldn't.

Schnapp: For me, it was so hard saying goodbye to Winona. When I went to watch her last day, I was like, "No, don't leave! You're my mom!"

Bower: I took home one of Vecna's hands. It's basically a floppy prosthetic hand that I pull out occasionally when people come round. I ask my friends, "You want to see it?" And they're like, "Yeah!" Then they put it on, and they're like, "Eurgh, this is gross." And yeah, in fairness, it is pretty grim. But yes, to answer your question, it was very surreal saying goodbye. (*Laughs*)

Wolfhard: It's definitely emotional. It probably won't feel final for a while.

Matarazzo: It's an adjustment, getting used to it all being over. But I've also seen the gang so frequently throughout this last year, which has been a relief, because that was a big fear. Anytime you wrap something up, you worry that you're not going to be able to spend a good amount of time with those people. But they're some

Left: Eleven says goodbye to Papa/Dr Martin Brenner (Matthew Modine). **Below left, top to bottom:** The power of the riff: Eddie (Joseph Quinn) in full flow; The gang worry for Max (Sadie Sink); Joyce takes matters into her own hands. **Below right:** Brown with Matt Duffer.

of my favourite people, so I don't really see a world where we're not very close. They're family.

Schnapp: What's sad isn't leaving the attention and the hype. It's those real relationships that we've formed through working on it for so long. Those relationships are very meaningful. As is having been able to touch real lives and real people. When I meet these fans in person and they tell me that, "The show saved my life," or that, "You helped me come out," things like that — that's really what matters at the end of the day. Would I still be in the closet were it not for playing Will? Yes, honestly. (*Schnapp came out as gay in a video in 2023.*) I definitely feel like seeing how the world reacted to his journey empowered me to feel confident in my skin.

McLaughlin: That's the rich thing about life, you know? Great things do come to an end. I'm sad, but it's bittersweet. People keep asking: "Are you upset it's over?!" I'm not really that upset. I'm just happy that I experienced it. It's like gold, it's so rare.

Brown: If I could go back and give the ten-year-old me at the start of this journey one piece of advice, I think I'd say: "Don't change yourself. Don't worry about what other people are going to say. You're beautiful. And your shaved head looks *amazing.*" (*Laughs*) But I think the show's legacy will be the impact it's had on other people, not us. How it has encouraged them to just be themselves. That's *everything*. That is so, so special.

Mass Murder

AFTER *KNIVES OUT* AND *GLASS ONION*, DANIEL CRAIG'S DETECTIVE BENOIT BLANC IS BACK TO CRACK A NEW CASE IN Wake Up Dead Man. AND THIS TIME, HE'S GOING TO CHURCH. LET US PRAY...

✝

WORDS **BEN TRAVIS**

Rian Johnson began hatching his latest murder plot in October 2022.

He'd already concocted death by pineapple juice; morphine mix-ups; lethal poisonings. The itch to strike again was rising. So he and his partner-in-crime, Daniel Craig, each lit a cigar and started imagining their next killer collaboration. Something darker, more sinister. *Spookier*. With Biblical implications. And more than just ideas sparked. "We almost burned down the hotel we were at," laughs Johnson. "We set the smoke alarm off." Add "arson" to the docket.

Thankfully, in Johnson's world, plotting a murder only means cooking up a new *Knives Out* mystery; a fresh case for Craig's genius detective Benoit Blanc, the Southern gent who sorts truth from fiction, right'uns from wrong'uns. As their second outing — the tech-bro-skewering *Glass Onion* — received its European premiere at the London Film Festival, the duo were reunited. And so, that evening, Johnson pitched where he wanted their third whodunnit to go. It was little more than a feeling, an instinct, to "bring it a little closer to the ground, do a small-town mystery again", the writer-director explains. Following the sun-soaked private-island playground of *Glass Onion* — a film that was "exactly what we wanted it to be", Johnson states — Blanc himself was all-in to go Gothic. "I loved the idea," says Craig, "and I thought that he should go for it."

The pair inbreathiated the moment (as *Glass Onion*'s language-abuser Miles Bron, played by Edward Norton, would say) — and lungfuls of tobacco. "It's one of the things we connect over. I think I smoke more cigars than him, probably because I'm a writer," Johnson laughs. "And so I have many more opportunities to avoid writing by smoking a cigar." Too bad the obliging hotel staff — "very happy to put us in this secluded spot," recalls Craig — failed to anticipate those voluminous Cuban plumes.

Still, the seed took root: three years later, Johnson and Craig have struck again, this time on holy ground. There is more foul play.

Clockwise from main: Daryl McCormack, Glenn Close, Cailee Spaeny, Kerry Washington, Andrew Scott, Jeremy Renner and, with his back to the camera, Josh Brolin; Father Jud (Josh O'Connor) with Monsignor Wicks (Brolin); Caught in the frame; Jud and an inquiring Benoit Blanc (Daniel Craig); Director Rian Johnson and Craig on set.

Another body. A smattering of suspects. And back amid it all, Benoit Blanc. Make way for *Wake Up Dead Man*.

Writing a *Knives Out* mystery sounds practically impossible. How do you even begin to crack a narrative structure akin to a doughnut, concealing another smaller doughnut inside its doughnut hole? Across *Knives Out* and *Glass Onion*, Johnson and Craig established some rules. There's always a murder. Maybe even more than one. There's always a new set of suspects, each with their own connection to the victim. There is always Benoit Blanc, be it in overcoat or stripy beachwear. And yet, Benoit is always paired with a new protagonist, themselves seeking the truth. To wrangle it all, and make it entertaining, and funny, and propulsive? With twists that hit just right? It's quite the juggle.

And yet, with *Wake Up Dead Man*, Johnson set himself an even higher bar. Specifically, this time he wanted to write an 'impossible crime' — a fiendish brainteaser to challenge Blanc like never before. "The impossible crime is, that it's impossible for anyone to have done the crime in the way that it's presented when the body is found," Johnson explains. "So how was it done?" It's a subgenre that lived up to its name. "This was definitely the hardest script I've ever written," he admits. Evidenced by the previous outings' seamless intertwining of tricksy narrative mechanisms, satisfying character arcs, and pointed thematic preoccupations, there's no obvious place to start. "It's a bit of all of it happening at once," says Johnson, "and it is really, really, really hard. *Really* hard. And it's getting harder!"

Swirling in the "cloud of several things at once", Johnson found many adjoining pieces. The impossible-crime category lent itself to a case seemingly without rational explanation, with possibly divine implications; thematically, he wanted to explore his changing relationship to religion over the years, channelled through a priestly protagonist; all of which fit with his genre desire to channel Edgar Allan Poe, the greats of Gothic fiction, and the mystery writing of G.K. Chesterton and John Dickson Carr. The result? Benoit Blanc is off to church in the upstate New York town of Chimney Rock, teaming up with Josh O'Connor's young Father Jud to investigate the murder of Josh Brolin's fire-and-brimstone preacher, Monsignor Wicks.

While Johnson went full mystery-mode, Craig left him to it. "Once he starts, he's like a dog with a bone — he works it and works it and works it until he gets it right," says the actor. Specifically, it took eight months of noodling on narrative structure before Johnson penned a word of dialogue. Eventually, a brand-new surprise-packed script arrived. Craig didn't know the killer in advance ("No! I don't want to know!"); he sat down, phone off, and read it. "And then read it immediately again," he says. "It's like watching the movies — it's always great to watch it a second time, because there are always bits you miss." (He's not the only cast member who pored over it repeatedly; Glenn Close, she tells us, read it three times to really get her head around it.)

In part, Craig imagined how *Wake Up Dead Man* would play to audiences ("When you watch movies like that, I don't know about you, but I'm always going, 'It's them! It's them! It's them!', constantly trying to figure it out," he says). But his real focus was experiencing the script through the eyes of its star detective. "I read them, I suppose, like Benoit," he explains. "I'm trying to sort of get in Benoit's head. I don't read it wanting to know who the murderer is; I want to know what the *whole* is."

Figuring out the whodunnit, though, wasn't the hard part for Johnson. The real challenge was to — within the fun, fizzy world of a Benoit Blanc case — probe at life's biggest, most impossible mysteries. "I grew up very Christian — not just raised going to church, but with ›

a belief in God, and a relationship with Christ being incredibly central to the way I framed everything in the world around me. And I'm not anymore," he explains. "I have lots of people in my life that I love that still are [religious], and there are things about that time that I still really treasure. I have a lot of complicated feelings about it." Who better to channel it all through than Benoit Blanc? "That's the real reason the script was so hard to write," says Johnson of the big ideas. "It's something I do take really seriously. I wanted to explore it in a really honest way, while also not being facile about it, or — God forbid — moralistic or irreverent."

How do you wrestle with the impossible? You take a leap of faith.

If you need Josh O'Connor in a pinch, you call Daniel Craig. Johnson knew he wanted the British actor for Father Jud Duplenticy, this film's foil to Benoit Blanc, akin to Ana de Armas' Marta in *Knives Out*, or Janelle Monáe's Helen in *Glass Onion*. Luca Guadagnino's 2024 tennis-drama *Challengers*, in which O'Connor plays one-third of a romantically entangled game of mixed-triples ("My favourite film of that year," Johnson enthuses), and Alice Rohrwacher's *La Chimera* sealed the deal. "I was immediately just like, 'Oh my God, can we get him?'" The answer: no. (Too busy.)

And then: maybe. Benoit Blanc was on the case. "I asked around the right people," intones Craig, cryptically. "There are the wrong people to ask, and the right people to ask. I think I just knew the right people." Having starred in Guadagnino's *Challengers* follow-up *Queer*, Craig knew a guy who knew a guy. "Like, he had some inside information or something," laughs Johnson. Craig was just as dead-set as the director on getting O'Connor. "I was quite forceful," says the actor. "It was like, 'This has to happen *today*. If you don't put the offer in, it's not happening.' And Rian did."

For O'Connor, joining a Rian Johnson ensemble was a blessing. "You almost laugh because it feels like something that happens to other actors," he says. "And then to hear it wasn't just a cameo or a supporting role, but that Jud was really the partner to Benoit Blanc in this story — it was a dream come true." He was unaware how hard Craig had fought for him to get the part. "I didn't know at the time, which makes me appreciate him even more," he says.

There was plenty of meat to chew on — Jud is a man of the cloth, but he's no angel. "He had been a boxer, and he had to get special dispensation from Rome to become a priest, because when he was younger, he actually killed a man in the ring," teases Johnson. "That's part of what brought him to the priesthood." Despite that dark past, he is "a very genuine soul, someone who strives to be Christlike" — an "essential goodness" that O'Connor could both embody, and balance out. "In movies, [that] can sometimes be boring," continues Johnson. "I knew I needed somebody who had some edge, who you were really going to fall in love with — similar to with Ana and Janelle. These characters really need the audience to be on their side from the beginning."

Too bad about the other priest. You don't have to be Benoit Blanc to discern that *Wake Up Dead Man* has, yes, a dead man — in the shape of Josh Brolin's Monsignor Wicks, the head of the Chimney Rock parish, whose religious fervour might not be as pure as Jud's. "The point that he gets to is, 'If somebody doesn't walk out of my congregation — if I'm not hitting people in their most sensitive place — then I haven't done my job,'" explains Brolin of Wicks' evangelical approach. The role brought something out of the actor that even he isn't sure he likes. "Watching Wicks, it doesn't make me feel good," he admits. "There's something about Wicks that's so *compensatory* — an insecurity in making himself as compelling as he is, and playing on the weakness of others — that, when I saw the movie, I started to question my own disposition."

We have, then, our detective. Our dead man. Our devoted priest. Which begs the

Above, top to bottom: Has Jud seen the light?; A moment of contemplation for Blanc amid sleeping souls.

Left: The unlikely pairing consider the evidence. **Above:** The ambitious Vera Draven (Kerry Washington) with the Monsignor's trusted helper Martha Delacroix (Glenn Close).

ultimate question: whodunnit? Could it be Glenn Close's Martha Delacroix, the Monsignor's right-hand woman? "Her whole life is the church, and taking care of Wicks," Close tells *Empire*. "Her whole being is about cleaning, and dusting, and arranging flowers, and steaming out the vestments." Maybe it's Dr Nat Sharp — "We love a local doctor in a smalltown mystery," laughs Johnson — played by Jeremy Renner, who made an almost-cameo in *Glass Onion* via the fictional 'Renning Hot' hot sauce. ("I think Dr Nat might have a bottle of it," Johnson muses. "He thinks, 'Oh, I love Jeremy Renner's movies! I'll get a bottle of that.") Perhaps suspicion falls on Andrew Scott's sci-fi author Lee Ross. The filmmaker resisted the temptation to go full *Fleabag* and put Scott back in the dog collar. "We've defied expectation! He's in the movie *with* a hot priest," the director chuckles. Or could it be Kerry Washington and Daryl McCormack's ambitious mother and adopted son, Vera and Cy Draven? Or Cailee Spaeny's pain-racked cellist Simone Vivane?

Meanwhile, in Benoit Blanc's corner is Mila Kunis' police chief Geraldine Scott, who has called in the mastermind since she's out of her depth, "a small-town police chief who's not used to dealing with a murder, let alone this shit", reasons Johnson. And, lurking in the shadows, is groundskeeper Samson ("If you're going to have Gothic graveyards, you need a groundskeeper roaming them"), played — in a feat of nominative determinism — by Thomas Haden Church. "It was that, or do product placement with Church's Chicken," Johnson laughs, "and I would never stoop so low."

For all the unusual suspects, the real heart of *Wake Up Dead Man* is the push and pull of Benoit Blanc, the ultimate rationalist, and Father Jud, the true believer. "That ends up being [Blanc's] journey," Johnson says, "really liking and having, ultimately, to collaborate with this person who is on the exact opposite side of this big fundamental thing." Craig agrees: "Benoit is, I think, pleasantly surprised by his own reaction to Jud, to the people. He's definitely seeing another side to himself." For these two to figure it out, against a fiendish murder-mystery backdrop, is Johnson's soul laid bare in cinematic form. "I have Jud and Blanc inside me," the filmmaker explains. "That's always the best-case scenario, because then, as opposed to giving a thesis, you're having an argument with yourself. That always leads to the most interesting stuff, when it's about the things that are really meaningful to you." Let the divine investigation begin.

Having set out to do the impossible with *Wake Up Dead Man*, Johnson has faith that he's cracked it — particularly with that central pairing. "There's something really special about this one," he says, days before the film's world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in September. "Just Josh [O'Connor] and Daniel playing off each other. It's something that brings me much joy."

In fact, the entire cast seemed to hit it off — they all chose to reunite at TIFF to watch the finished film for the first time, together, with an audience. On set, nobody went to their own trailer, too busy playing games together ("I always bring my backgammon set," says Close). Craig — an unlikely ukelele enthusiast — bought everyone their own uke as a wrap gift. "I sent him a video of me playing it," says Brolin. He received back "the most learned, talented playing of the ukulele I've ever seen" from Craig. "And I was like, 'Well, fuck me, then.' And he looked good, and he had, like, a three-piece suit on or some shit."

Wake Up Dead Man's completion ends Johnson's Netflix deal — two *Knives Out* mysteries, for a reported whopping $450 million. However, Johnson's mystery machine won't turn off. "I'm not sick of making these movies. I feel invigorated, if anything," he says. "I would be happy if Daniel and I kept doing other work, then coming back and making one of these every once in a while, for the rest of our lives. I'd be thrilled with that." Still, after three Benoit Blanc mysteries in a row, Johnson is planning a palate-cleanser next — something new, original, untethered. "It kind of harkens back to the '70s paranoid thrillers. It's got kind of a light sci-fi element to it," he teases.

To borrow a phrase from Daniel Craig's other screen icon: Benoit Blanc will return. Probably. And with *Wake Up Dead Man* doing the festival rounds, maybe it's time for Johnson and Craig to start discussing their next case. Perhaps with some cigars. "If they'll let us!" says Craig. "I don't know where we're going to smoke them. We'll find somewhere without fire alarms." Amen.

WAKE UP DEAD MAN: A KNIVES OUT MYSTERY IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 26 AND ON NETFLIX FROM DECEMBER 12

STARS

ALIGN

ADAM SANDLER.
GEORGE CLOONEY.
TWO VERY DIFFERENT
A-LISTERS WHO'VE NEVER
JOINED FORCES...
UNTIL **JAY KELLY**.

WE GET TOGETHER
WITH HOLLYWOOD'S
GLITZIEST ODD COUPLE

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

ON THE SURFACE, GEORGE CLOONEY AND ADAM SANDLER MAKE STRANGE BEDFELLOWS.

One is an actor, writer and director, who moved past his '90s-TV-heartthrob status to become one of Hollywood's most recognisable leading men, an old-fashioned A-lister in the Cary Grant mould. The other is a comedy superstar, whose prolific film output since leaving *Saturday Night Live* has earned him billions in box office, a legion of loyal fans and a lucrative Netflix deal (with occasional stints working with serious dramatic directors like Paul Thomas Anderson and the Safdie brothers). One is known for suave sophistication; the other is known for the line, "He called the shit 'poop'!"

Not exactly alike, then. But in *Jay Kelly*, the latest film from writer-director Noah Baumbach (of *Marriage Story* and *Frances Ha* fame), they are the best of pals. In a neat bit of meta-casting, Clooney plays the Jay Kelly of the title, a very Clooney-esque actor described in the film as "the last of the old movie stars", while Sandler plays his long-suffering but fiercely loyal manager Ron Sukenick. When Jay reflects on his starry life and his neglected family, he decides to embark on a madcap trip across Europe, with Ron and his team attempting to keep up with him. It's a rich, outlandish stew of Preston Sturges-style comedy-drama — a film about family versus work, Hollywood versus real life, pratfalls versus pathos.

On the eve of the film's premiere at the Venice Film Festival in late August, *Empire* met up with Clooney and Sandler in a suite at the floating city's swanky Hotel Excelsior, where they were warm and charming company: Clooney dressed in a trim navy suit, Sandler in a golf shirt. Over the course of our conversation, the two traded banter and barbs, compliments and genuine affection, dropping names and swapping stories with endless energy. The Sandman

Above, left to right: Jay (George Clooney) handles the show; while manager Ron (Adam Sandler) takes care of business. **Left, top to bottom:** Clooney with director Noah Baumbach; Laura Dern plays publicist Liz; Director and DP Linus Sandgren on set.

and the Cloonman: this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

How long have you known each other?
George Clooney: We met when I hosted *Saturday Night Live*. In '96, maybe? We played basketball then.
Adam Sandler: Yes, that was it. Clooney hosted *SNL*. But this is the first time we've spent real time [together]. We got to know each other.
Clooney: It was really fun.

Did you keep up with each other's work over the years?
Clooney: Always! I would write to him, or he would write to me. I remember I directed a movie, and he wrote to me out of the blue and just said he loved it. We check in on each other. It's been fun. And then when I got a call that said, "You wanna do this movie with Adam?" I was like, "That sounds really cool!" I think I said yes the day I got the script.

So *Jay Kelly* was pitched as a Clooney/Sandler double-act, then?
Sandler: Yeah. I got the script, and I knew about George [being in the role]. I did *The Meyerowitz Stories* with Noah so I got to know him very well then, and Jesus, he's a driven young man. A smart bastard. So meticulous and so smart.
Clooney: Meticulous means a lot of takes. (*Laughs*) He's being diplomatic.
Sandler: That's the first time I used the word "meticulous" in my life.

The film presents kind of the inverse of that — Jay always wants to do another take.
Clooney: I know actors like that. I've directed actors who are like, "Can we go again?" If you're a director, you have to say, "I got it. Tell them it's done." Or actors can go forever. Noah was very good at knowing when he had it.
Sandler: You know what's really nice? When Jay's asking for another take, it's not only about beating his performance — it's about, "Let's not let this end." It's the last take of the movie, and when you're making a movie and you have this family with the cast and crew, and then all of a sudden it's done, it is an odd feeling.

So did the script resonate with you both? This is a film about filmmaking, after all.
Clooney: Well, it worried me when I read that Jay Kelly is a 64-year-old from Kentucky. (*He laughs*; *Clooney is a 64-year-old from Kentucky*.)
Sandler: It clicked with me. We both live a similar life to Jay, making movies, being away for months at a time, making it your priority, trying to do the best work you can do. And while you're doing that, that does shut down certain things around you. My character, taking care of Jay, thinking he's closer than he actually is — I've seen that in our business.
Clooney: One takeaway I had was that Jay's 64 years old, and he's filled with nothing but regret. I have lived a very different life. Probably because I got famous later in life, I didn't chuck away all those things. If I got hit by a bus tomorrow, I'd go, "I did alright." I got a wife who loves me. Kids who love me — for now, anyway. We'll see.
Sandler: So far so good!
Clooney: I pay them to love me. (*Laughs*)

There's a lot of tenderness between your characters. How did your relationship evolve off-screen over the course of the movie?
Sandler: I remember when we were getting closer, me and George. We did a scene on the train. And I remember, mid-take, I look at Clooney's face, and I think, "That's guy's a handsome bastard. (*Clooney laughs*) I love him. And I'm so happy I know him." *While* we're shooting it. Then I'm thinking, "Oh shit, I got lines to say! Let's go. Get back in this thing."
Clooney: What I liked about the way Adam and I were able to work is that right off the bat, we were comfortable enough that we were able to talk on top of each other ›

throughout. There's always that overlapping dialogue. It's not waiting for somebody to speak. Which is how people actually speak. That was fun. It's hard to get there with actors sometimes, because everybody wants to get their lines in.

The film is about the actor-manager relationship. What is your relationship like with your real managers?
Sandler: My team's been around so long. Y'know, some are in their late eighties. So I don't put as much on them as I used to. (*Clooney laughs*) I've always been very close with everyone I work with. I don't know if I ever 'Jay Kelly'-ed anybody the day of, making them go to Europe. I give 'em a heads-up first.
Clooney: I don't have a manager. I just have an agent, Bryan Lourd, and he's a dear friend of mine. The fun part for me is, Giovanni [Zeqireya], the guy who plays my security guy in the movie — he's *actually* my security guy. I've known him for 30 years. He's more than that, he's also a really dear friend and he runs our house in Italy. I met him here at the Venice Film Festival, actually. We had to do that scene [in *Jay Kelly*] where we're running through a field. We do it like three times and I go, "I'm 64 years old! I can't run, and he's seventy-fucking-one!"

Adam, one of your lines really stood out: "You're Jay Kelly, but *I'm* Jay Kelly too." At a certain level of fame as an actor, you become a whole business.
Clooney: Remember the Cary Grant line? "Everybody wants to be Cary Grant. Even *I* want to be Cary Grant."
Sandler: That's a good one. With the people I've worked with over the years, my friends and my family, you feel like there is a team that's pulling for you. When you're successful, they're happy for you. And when you get punched in the face, they feel that too.

Above: Backstage bonhomie. **Right, top to bottom:** Jay with his director, played by *Andor*'s Kyle Soller; In demand; The star and fellow actor Timothy (Billy Crudup) '*chez* Jay'.

Jay is very openly insecure. Even with all your experience and success, do either of you still get insecure, too?
Sandler: Yes. Yes, yes, yes. Always.
Clooney: I can't imagine anybody who's an actor ever being fully secure. That would be crazy. Have you ever met any actor that you thought was fully secure? I haven't. You can fake confidence until you have it too, which is part of what you do.
Sandler: Yeah. I think I do that.
Clooney: You're not even in this interview, right? You're still in bed. This is a dream.

How was the shoot? You filmed in Italy, France and the UK — was it fun running around Europe together?
Sandler: We had some good family

Top to bottom: Clooney exuding charisma in *Ocean's Eleven*; And in the "solid as a rock" *Batman & Robin*; Sandler in *Punch-Drunk Love*; And "beautiful" in *The Meyerowitz Stories*.

Alamy

weekends with George. George just makes sure life is good. He knows exactly where to eat, anywhere you are.
Clooney: (*Correcting*) In Italy.
Sandler: You were pretty good in London, too. You know your stuff.
Clooney: I did okay. But Italy, I really know.
Sandler: Somehow he maintains that body, eating as much pasta as he wants.

At the end of the film, a reel of Jay Kelly's films is played, using clips from your actual films, George. What was that experience like?
Clooney: That was a really funny thing. It's weird — particularly the really young stuff. You're like, "Holy shit!" Long hair, no talent, over-confident! Honestly, it felt like *Cinema Paradiso*, where you're sitting in there, watching these things brought back.
Sandler: It rocked us both, man. We both had to be affected by that. We were both hit hard.
Clooney: There's a weird thing where the older you get, the more you look at this stuff and go, "Wow, that was a long time ago." From my eyes, it was a minute ago. That's why I love that line in the movie when [a fan of Jay Kelly] says, "When I see you, I see my whole life." I get it, man. I became friends with Gregory Peck and I felt like that. I'd be sitting there with him, he'd be telling a story, and I'm just watching him, thinking, "Dude, this guy's in *To Kill A Mockingbird*!" You know where you were when you saw *The Omen* the first time. *Roman Holiday*. You really do live your life through people's faces and pictures. And you're not allowed to get old. I have people come [up to] me all the time saying, "You're a lot older than I thought." Like, fuck off! I'm 64!
Sandler: That was a big thing said in my house. If *The Love Boat* was on, my mother would say, "That's so-and-so — oh, he got *old*!"

There's a great line in the film: "All my memories are movies." Does that resonate for you?
Clooney: I remember the experiences of doing them. Movies are like music in that sense. It puts people at a time and a place, like music does. I think that some of that is true. But I don't remember the movies as much as I remember who we were on the set with. I remember shooting basketball.
Sandler: I liked just sitting around, just talking [on this film].
Clooney: You with your dumb-ass dog, Meatball, hanging out. Our two trailers were like a home. A frat house.
Sandler: Absolutely. That's what you remember.
Clooney: Do you go back and watch movies you're in?
Sandler: Zero. But on rare occasions, I'll catch a couple of minutes when [one is] on TV and say, "Oh, okay! Well, we must have cut that out of the movie! I remembered this differently!" You?
Clooney: Some of them, if [one is] on. But in general, they always just feel like different points of time. The only reason to look at them is to look at how much you've aged. Like, holy shit!

Do you have a favourite of each other's films?
Clooney: I thought *Punch-Drunk Love* was amazing. That was the first time we'd seen you do something where it wasn't just a straight-up comedy. I also have to say that you were so beautiful in *The Meyerowitz Stories*. And not just because it's Noah. I really loved that. I thought you and Ben [Stiller] were great together. I felt like that movie got short shrift. Somehow it didn't get the attention.
Sandler: You're right. But George's work...
Clooney: (*Whispers*) Say *Batman*. Say *Batman*. Say *Batman*.
Sandler: I thought *Batman* was solid as a rock! (*Clooney laughs*) Clooney's had maybe ten that you could go to. I can't pick. But I send the love.
Clooney: He sends me beautiful notes.
Sandler: I love his acting. I love how he carries a movie. I love how in charge he is. Even when we were making Noah's movie, George would be like, "How are we feeling? What do you think?" His opinion meant so much to me. He knows about every year of cinema. He knows the history of movies, the equipment, the shots. I don't know a guy like him.
Clooney: We had a really fun time, that's for sure. When you look at the *Ocean's* films, the reason why they worked so well was because you had all these stars kind of handing off the scene to the other one, not trying to take it. And that's what it felt like when we were working together. That's a rare thing that happens in films, that spirit of generosity, because if one person starts going, "This is my scene," then everybody does it.

So, would the two of you work together again?
Clooney: Absolutely not. (*Laughs*)
Sandler: Throw me in the *Ocean's* movies, buddy. I'm ready.
Clooney: He doesn't even give me one cameo in *Happy Gilmore 2*.
Sandler: We almost did! But [Steve] Buscemi wanted it!
Clooney: I was sitting by my phone the whole time. Like, what the fuck, man!
Sandler: No, we will do something. Maybe you direct me too!
Clooney: I'm done with directing for a bit. It takes you away from your family.
Sandler: Well, we'll do it at your house!
Clooney: I'll direct it on an iPhone. Done.

JAY KELLY IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 14
AND ON NETFLIX FROM DECEMBER 5

HOLD
TIGHT

IN *PILLION*, TWO MEN EMBARK ON A NO-HOLDS-BARRED BDSM RELATIONSHIP. AND AS WE DISCOVER, ABSOLUTELY NOTHING WAS OFF LIMITS...

WORDS **CHRISTINA NEWLAND**

AISTĖ STANCIKAITĖ

WE ALL KNOW THE ROMCOM CHECKLIST. The meet-cute. The sweet date-montage. The meet-the-parents scene. So how do you approach making a romcom today without leaning into every cliché in the book?

You could make it about BDSM, for one thing. And you could set it in ancient Rome. Or on a gay cruise. You could put your characters in gladiator garb, a Hawaiian shirt, or make them — say — a part of a biker gang.

That was what British filmmaker Harry Lighton was thinking when he set out to write his first feature, *Pillion*. He wanted to adapt Adam Mars-Jones' scabrous, sad, funny 2020 novel *Box Hill*, about a gay BDSM relationship in the world of bikers. But it was the central sexual and emotional relationship, one of submissive inexperience versus dominant certainty, that Lighton wanted to explore most. "I like to take big swings at the source material and see what sticks," he explains to *Empire*. "There was such extremity between the characters, I thought it might be better in Ancient Rome, where that was built into the hierarchy. But eventually we returned to the world of the book, and of bikers."

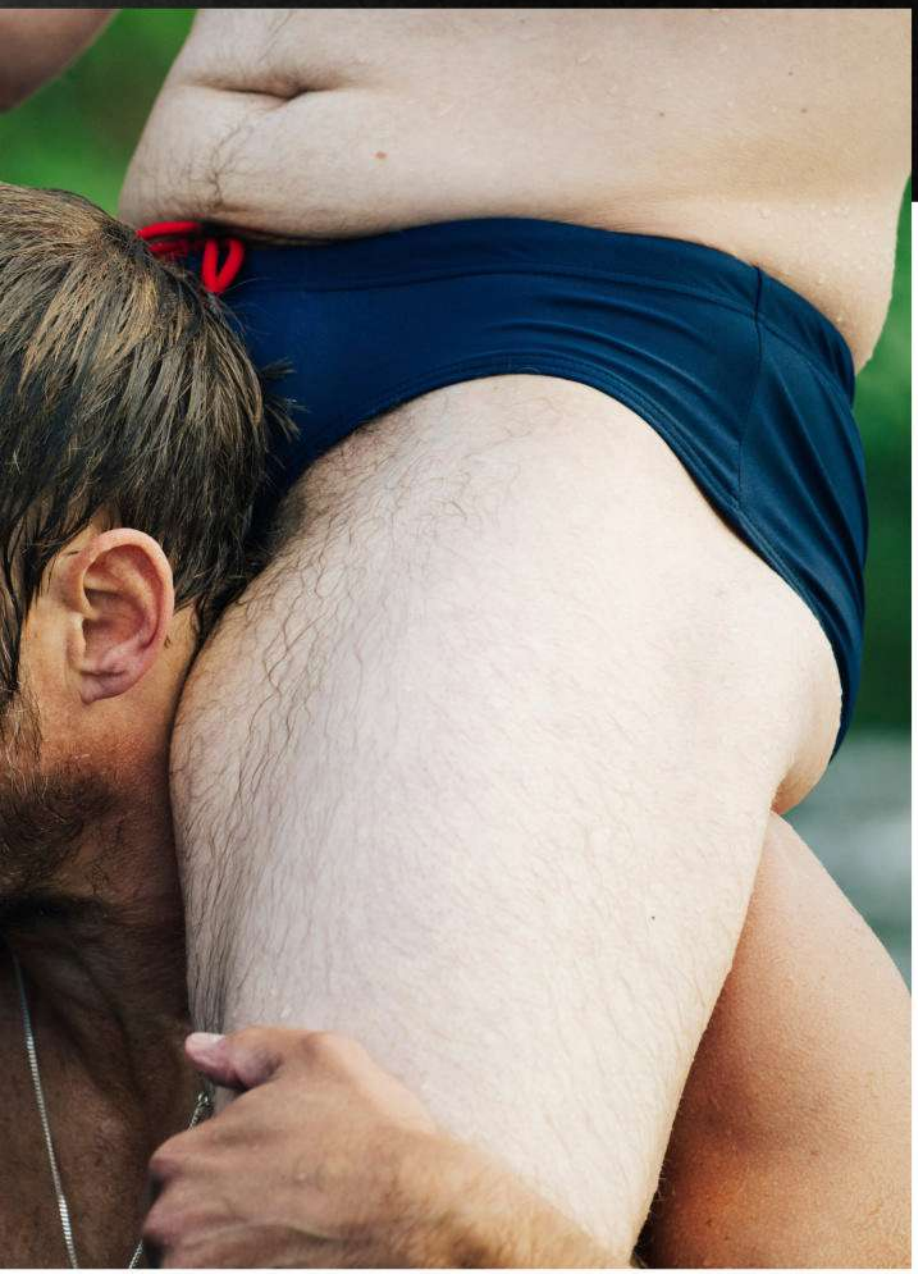
His final screenplay settled for something much more workaday, then, updating the novel's 1970s setting to present day, suburban London. The romcom meet-cute becomes oral sex behind a Primark. ("Did you kiss?" becomes a difficult question to answer for our protagonist.) The sweet date-montage is thrown into the 'wrong' part of the movie. And meeting the parents? A disaster.

Pillion stars Harry Melling (best known as Dudley Dursley in the *Harry Potter* films) as Colin, a shy, openly gay young man living with his close-knit, conventionally British parents, and bored by the men his well-meaning mum tries to set him up with. But when he encounters handsome stranger Ray — Alexander Skarsgård in full biker leathers — playing darts in the local pub, he is immediately hypnotised. The pair begin an enigmatic dominant-submissive relationship which turns romcom stereotypes into disarray. While Ray's dog sleeps on the sofa, Colin gets on the floor, and does all the housework and cooking, as part of a 24/7 sub-dom dynamic that hinges on the sexual thrill of inferiority. "It was such an interesting, creatively rich thing to see how romcom tropes map onto such an atypical romantic model," says Lighton. "Queering genre conventions excites me. And by no means is it just about sex. It's about self-definition and about how taking risks and having uncomfortable experiences can expand your self-definition."

To Lighton, romcoms no longer need to have the same parameters or expectations. Just as romantic relationships have become more fluid, so too can the genre.

FOR SHY, WATCHFUL PROTAGONIST COLIN, actor Harry Melling was the first person Lighton had in mind. "I first saw him in [the Coen brothers'] *The Ballad Of Buster Scruggs* and thought he was so magnetic, but in a way that isn't at all 'alpha'. Because Colin is so observational and passive, I needed someone who could do that while keeping the audience captivated," the director explains. Melling's melancholy stare — not unlike a Margaret Keane 'big eyes' portrait — evokes what Lighton calls "the loneliness of existing outside the norm", but also gives an everyman quality to the film's biker context. "Masculinity is supposed to be this dominant thing," says Melling. "But Colin knows he's not that. For many people I spoke to, being submissive was an ultimate form of power and masculinity."

Rather than lean too much into poetic homage to bikers past, *Pillion* is placed firmly in the here and now — that here and now being the humdrum London suburb of Bromley, where Skarsgård — the 6' 4" Swede — drew odd looks from passersby simply by walking down the high street, according to Lighton. Ray's near alien-like presence in Colin's world is made all the more strange by the enigma of his backstory. Under strict conditions not to discuss their personal lives, Colin learns nothing about Ray's family or background — even what he does for work. As Lighton points out: "In a world where privacy or anonymity is pretty hard to maintain — with the current digital age — there's something



Clockwise from main: Dominating the scene: Ray (Alexander Skarsgård); Ray, Colin (Harry Melling) and their seemingly symbolic canine pals meet up; Director Harry Lighton on location with Skarsgård; Ray and Colin get closer.

elusive and also erotically charged about someone refusing to reveal the facts of their identity. From the first time I met [Skarsgård], we said: 'Let's just never discuss the backstory.'"

Refusing to offer pre-determined reasoning for Ray's behaviour felt like a more realistic approach to take. "I was really adamant that Ray's sexual desires, his relationship history, wouldn't be explained through some kind of trauma in his past, or some Freudian explanation," says Lighton. "It's just as possible that he's living this way because it's what turns him on, and because it's an unconventional desire he's chosen to build his life around. That was my reason for not discussing backstory, particularly when it comes to sex — especially atypical sex. In film, as in life, I think it's far harder to pin down, if you can pin it down at all."

For a kink subculture that has long been saddled with baggage from those outside it, *Pillion* is wonderfully free of explanation. Colin's desire to be dominated, timid as he is, certainly doesn't come from an unloving home: he has a conventional family life. Equally, Ray displays brief acts of kindness and seeks consent even as he remains forbiddingly remote and withholding; he isn't simply a bully, but nor are his predilections unpacked. As Skarsgård says: "Another writer might have it where eventually, you could find a little bit about Ray and his backstory. Or you'd find out what the three girls' names he's got tattooed on his chest are. But I love the fact that Harry [Lighton] stuck to his guns. Ray is as enigmatic at the end of the movie as he was at the beginning of it."

Unfortunately, this proves problematic for Colin's parents, hapless Pete (Douglas Hodge) and strong-willed mum Peggy (a memorable Lesley Sharp, firing off some vicious quips), who are both supportive of their son but perhaps overly invested in his dating life. Their failure to grasp the sub-dom dynamic, and their understandable misgivings about how Ray is treating Colin, provide a nuanced portrait of both parental care and external judgement of ›

alternative lifestyles. In one key sequence, where Ray is finally cajoled into a family roast dinner, his refusal to share personal details is seen as beyond the pale. "In many ways it felt like the biggest scene, because it was the coming together of Colin's two worlds," says Lighton. "It was the scene that took the longest to get right, because there's a sense there's a comeuppance for Ray, but also that there's some overstepping."

The risk of misunderstanding an already-misunderstood sexual subculture was one Lighton was very aware of, so he made a point of reaching out to real people who knew best. "Did you know that there really is a correct method to licking a boot?" Melling asks *Empire*. If you want to learn, the *Pillion* team knows the guys to teach you. The GBMCC — the Gay Bikers Motorcycle Club — is an LGBTQ+ social club based in biker culture since 1977. Several real members appear as Ray's onscreen biker friends, and their input was invaluable.

"I went up to Birmingham for one of their annual general meetings, and spent the weekend on the back of their treasurer Kevin's bike, and chatting to them all," says Lighton. "The GBMCC is not strictly about sex, but it's a community amongst gay men and a passion for bikes. And often that kind of tessellates with certain kinks. They gave Alex and Harry the information to really inhabit their world — something practical about bikes or how to lick a boot or what lube they might use in a scene."

"They were so generous and inviting," says Skarsgård. "They were fearless in opening up and showing us everything about their culture." And *Pillion* does show us everything.

FOR A DEBUT FEATURE, *PILLION* IS A DEFT tonal balance — tender, sexually transgressive, unpredictable, and with deadpan visual-humour, unafraid to get its kicks from a comic-cut to a Dachshund, or shimmying bare bottoms in an unexpected context. For the actors, this had an immediate appeal. "It was all there in the writing and tonal calibration of what Harry has done, which I think is actually really complicated," says Melling. "To go from warmer, light-hearted moments into something far more shocking." This element drew Skarsgård in, too. "A lot of scripts that are even pretty good, they feel like a version of a film you've seen before," he says. "It was such a funny and touching and weird love story, in this subculture that we don't often see on screen."

Skarsgård was physically more or less a dead ringer for his character Ray's description in the novel, and brought what Lighton calls "a mischief" to the role: "There was the potential for Alex to bring a surprising quality to domination, where it wasn't just physicality, it was also psychology. He has a kind of complexity which plays nicely against what is almost physical simplicity — he is like the bona fide hot alpha male. But there's something beneath the surface that's playing against those good looks."

Right: Ray in 'ignore mode'. **Below right:** Colin and dad Pete (Douglas Hodge, second from right) entertain the local pub.

In one particularly striking scene, Ray and Colin wrestle together in full BDSM gear in Ray's living room, commingling pain and arousal as Ray physically overwhelms the smaller and meeker man. This was the meeting point for the co-stars, too. "It was literally like, 'Hi, I'm Alex. Right, let's go,'" Melling recalls. "We literally jumped into rehearsing the wrestling scene. But it was the most brilliant way of getting to know someone very quickly. It turns into a sex scene, but actually it's full of weight and charm and strangeness."

"It was definitely a good icebreaker," agrees Skarsgård.

As Lighton explains, such sequences needed to feel organic. "It felt really crucial when you're dealing with transgressive sex that it didn't feel like you were simply doing it to provoke the audience, that there was character sewn into all of those scenes and character development." The copious sex in the film is shot with both care

Left: Colin rides pillion, with Ray in the driving seat. **Above, top to bottom:** A hedonistic day out; Colin sporting his padlock.

and humour, shifting tonally from lustful to awkward to touching, in ways we rarely see in cinema. "I often find sex scenes boring on screen," says Skarsgård. "There's a lot of tension leading up to [them], and then once people get going, it's not very interesting. But these scenes were dramatically quite interesting. There's lust, but also jealousy and confusion and pain."

It was vital that it looked natural. "These sex scenes were very much telling the narrative of Colin coming into his own and Ray sort of teaching him," says Melling. "Harry Lighton was clear with us from early on that he wanted a clumsiness to them. He didn't want close-ups of hands touching the sheets and things like that."

To help in that regard was intimacy coordinator Robbie Taylor Hunt, on hand to guide the actors through the experience. By all accounts he also became a collaborator. "One of the real advantages of an intimacy coordinator — beyond making sure the actors are comfortable — was bringing a real specificity and technicality to the sex scenes," says Lighton. "So the choreography of those was in tandem with our discussion as a group about: how can we show that Colin is sexually inexperienced in this moment, when the camera is just going to be on his face? Or what cues will show that the other bikers are more experienced subs? So it was about discovering how to shoot those scenes and how to add details which took us away from the generic."

The look of the film's bondage-wear was just as pivotal. "What they wear is so important, and so akin to their identity," explains Melling. "Like, are you a leather daddy? Are you a pup? What is your identity? It's so much a part of how they express themselves," he says, referring to the GBMCC members he got to know. "And so the idea of being measured up, or the tight leathers, or the, you know, wrestling singlet with a hole for your bum, is that all this stuff is so akin with how they want to express themselves and who they are." During the course of the film, Colin goes from dull, tucked-in, button-down shirts to a shaved head and heavy-duty padlock necklace. Skarsgård, meanwhile, is at one point strapped into an obscenely tight leather unitard with a belly-button-skimming open chest, looking like something from the famous queer illustrator Tom of Finland, who was well known for his muscle-bulging erotic images of sailors and, notably, bikers.

With so many powerful symbols of cinema and culture of queer biker past — from Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* through to William Friedkin's *Cruising* — it was important for Lighton that his film distinguished itself with the reality of modern gay-biker subculture. "*Scorpio Rising* is such an iconic film, and I had that aesthetic in my head before I spoke to Harry," says Skarsgård. "But this is a more contemporary version of that. It's a modern Japanese race-bike, and the outfit is a onesie. And in a film like *Cruising*, the underworld is so ominous. Here, you're invited into that world, and it's sexy and funny."

ULTIMATELY, *PILLION* DOES anthropologically detail a kink subculture of queer, biker-specific BDSM — but its circumstances also speak more widely to romance, infatuation, and learning the hard way about what you want — or don't — from any romantic relationship. As Lighton says: "For me, it's a story about people who, in some sense, exist outside the kind of inherited relationship models, trying to work out how to build a life which works for them. And how to place those goal-posts around that life, and sometimes expand those goal-posts and sometimes contract them."

Most of all, like any relationship, the sub-dom contract between Ray and Colin — or anyone — requires trust. "Have you ever been on the back of a motorbike?" Melling asks *Empire*. "They say you have to pretend your body is like a sack of potatoes, and just let yourself go [in] whatever direction the driver is pulling. As a passenger, you're so submissive to the person driving." There's a term for it: it's commonly known as 'riding pillion'.

***PILLION* IS IN CINEMAS FROM NOVEMBER 28**

THE PIONEER

FROM THE START, **SIGOURNEY WEAVER** HAS DEFIED CATEGORISATION AND EXPLODED EXPECTATIONS. AS THE QUEEN OF SCI-FI RETURNS IN AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH, WE SPEAK TO HER ABOUT A SINGULAR LEGACY

WORDS
TERRI WHITE

ROBERT ASCROFT

Sigourney Weaver, photographed exclusively for *Empire* at Lightstorm, Manhattan Beach, Los Angeles, on September 21, 2025.

Sigourney Weaver set cinema screens alight 46 years ago as *Alien*'s warrant officer Ripley: Jonesy the ("little shithead") cat in one hand, a flamethrower in the other. An exquisite visual summation of this new, radical female sci-fi action character, and the soon-to-be-star playing her. A six-foot, New York born-and-bred, Off-Broadway actor who, it was opined, would never make it in Hollywood. And, well, if you measure her career against some traditional models for 1970s actresses — roles as the plain, platonic pal, or the hankie-holding girlfriend — Sigourney Weaver didn't. Instead, she *remade* it.

Already known in theatre circles pre-*Alien* for her bold and bonkers characters, she had started as she meant to go on. And while a taste for the anti-clichéd may have been at least partly borne of necessity, it stuck on the tongue through choice. Today, then, at the age of 75, it should be deeply unsurprising that she's mostly preoccupied with playing a teenage sapient humanoid who lives on an extraterrestrial moon. But *Avatar* is far more than just a flex of those 'you didn't expect that' muscles. It's the continuation of a collaboration with writer-director ("now friend") James Cameron. One that began in the heat of her early career, producing the highlight of her first franchise (*Aliens*), and still sees her tearing up new ground in her third (after *Ghostbusters*).

And if you think, deep into her septuagenarian era — with more *Avatar* movies and a fourth blockbuster franchise incoming — that Sigourney Weaver is even remotely done torching our screens, then, well, you clearly haven't been paying attention.

At the Toronto International Film Festival, you called *Fire And Ash* "timely". There's a definite tonal shift — what's changed since *The Way Of Water*?

It's a very different moment for the family, having lost the eldest son, Neteyam, and still not having a real home, and fighting for their country. There's a lot more upheaval and unexpected new elements, like the Ash People, who are so completely opposite to the Na'vi. There's much more darkness because these are our own people fighting us, and all we have is each other, more than ever. For my character [Kiri], there's a lot of realisations and discoveries. She still has trouble connecting with the ancestors; the one thing the Na'vi people can count on is closed off to her and that's confusing and upsetting. And because she's half human, it makes her feel like she's not part of them. I remember when I first read two and three [*The Way Of Water* and *Fire And Ash*], three seemed, by contrast, very dark — and yet here we are in a very dark period on the planet. There's something eerie about how Jim [Cameron] can anticipate these revolutions in our world.

Only James Cameron would cast you in *Avatar* as Dr Grace Augustine, kill you off and then say, "Oh, we're bringing you back as a teenage girl..."

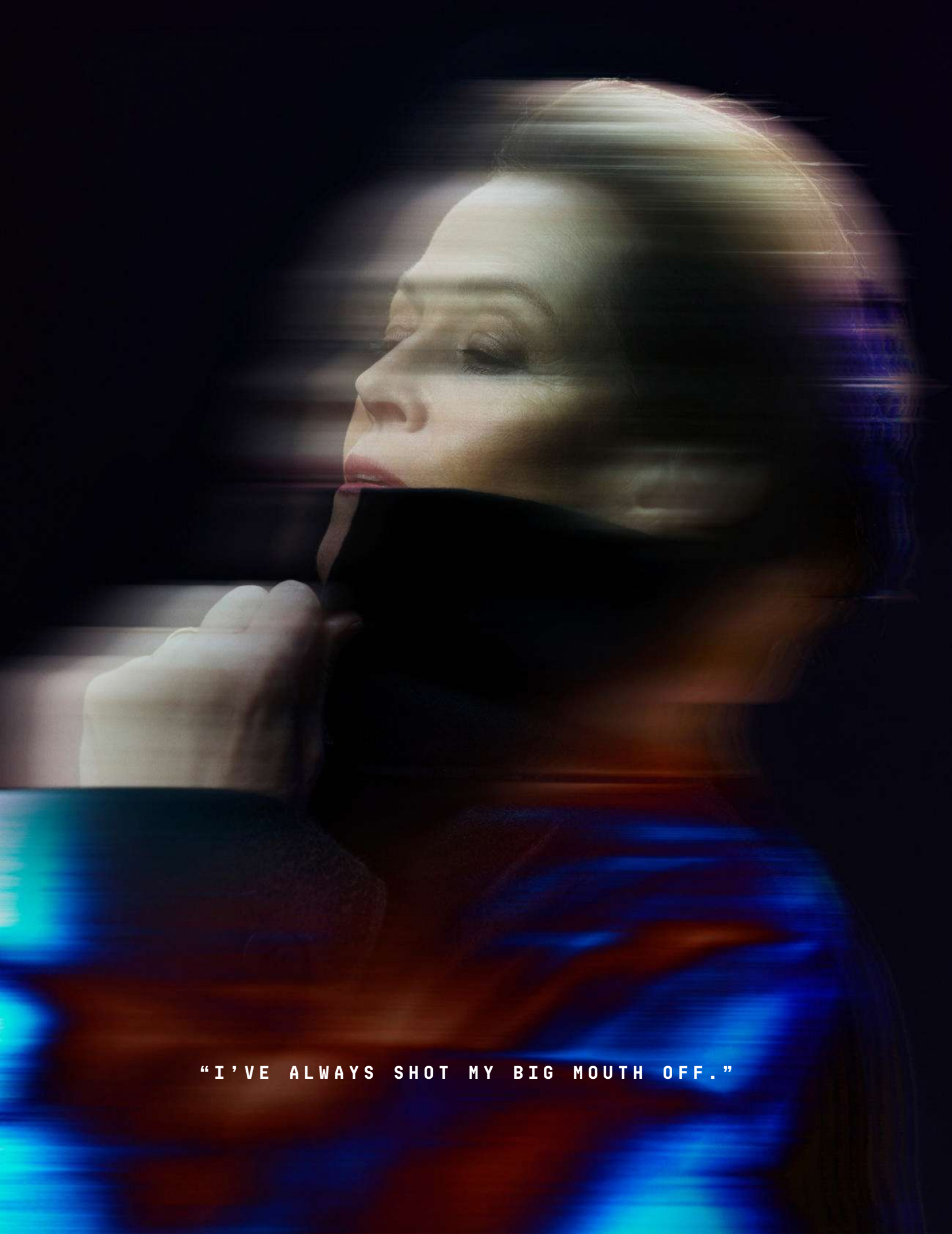
I remember having lunch with him and we talked about this forest girl, but I had no idea he'd create something that made so much sense, and was so playable. I mean, of course, he has kids this age so he's living with that reality all the time. But she's a joy to play — and also, it's a chance for me. I was such a miserable 14-, 15-year-old. I was so insecure — and funny, so I managed to survive high school — but I didn't have any real confidence. And it's given me an opportunity to go back and re-enter that state of mind, be in it and trust myself in a different way [with] that character; find the little crumbs of me there in the character. I felt a lot of despair when I was 14 and 15, and Kiri and all of them feel despair because of what's happening to their world. But she has more support, perhaps, than I did as a kid, and so I find it very healing, in a way, to play her.

You're working and training with the young cast — and have done since *The Way Of Water*.

It was very important to Jim that we do everything. And I wanted to do all the things with the kids. The parkour was intense, the free-diving really was *very* intense. But I think, for me, as someone who's about to turn 76, I can't afford to do nothing, you know? I mean, I'm not a crazy person, but I do try to do something for an hour every day. I've always been like that, but now I have this extra motivation, because I don't want to be an old crone by the time I get to [films] four and five. I still have to be able to do all these ›

Below: James Cameron, Trinity Bliss, Britain Dalton, Jack Champion and Sigourney Weaver making *Fire And Ash*.

Previous page: Black vinyl jacket and trousers: LaRoxx. Opposite: Black vinyl jacket and trousers: LaRoxx


“I’VE ALWAYS SHOT MY BIG MOUTH OFF.”

things — a little less free-diving, but that was so exciting, the luxury of six months with the guy who trains Navy SEALs. And the fact that we are all in it together with our varying degrees of anxiety about swimming and going deep. I always had to get to the set, get in the water maybe 20 minutes before everybody else. It took me that long to get set up, warm up and calm down, because your body has to make a transition to being a water creature, from being a mammal. And that was never easy for me, [but] it's fascinating. It's really kind of a magic thing. I wish I could show it to you because it's like a little bridge to this other world that was very necessary for us to be able to do these long days underwater.

I saw the water tanks on set of *The Way Of Water* and couldn't get over the scale. I know they say you have to master your fear, but oh my God...
And it's not like you get used to doing it! I think all of us had to cross that bridge every time, every day, or even after lunch too, you know? Just have to make that conversion against all the things in your body that say, "This is it, you're going to die." Yeah, it's fascinating to find out what you're capable of. Often [with] films I'm not the bravest creature in the world. Often I'm up against it and yet, because I really want to do it, I push myself and I go, "Wow. Never would I have thought I could do that." But it doesn't make it any easier the next time.

And with Kiri, you added those less perfect, more 'teenage' elements to the character James created?
He comes up with these big moments, but leaves it up to you to do the work to get there — and not give up and go, "Oh, God!" No-one wants to let Jim down. You know, every time we come back to an *Avatar* movie, the world has moved on. And so I'm grateful for a filmmaker like Jim putting years into these stories, reminding us of *who* we really are, *where* we are. Like our democracy right now, we believed there were checks and balances. In fact, that isn't happening, and you realise how much you've taken for granted — and now you have to fight. And that's where we are with the planet, too. It's an important lesson for us in America, and it's an important lesson for us on Earth. You can't just hope everything will be alright. You've got to actually take a stand.

People talk about the future of cinema, but there's an urgency around large-scale, impactful cinema at a time when, as you say, the world is on fire.
It's great to hear you say that. You know, films are, to me, sustenance, nourishment. And there's a lot of stuff that's not that nourishing, it passes the time. But every now and then — like I just had a movie open at TIFF [Toronto International Film Festival], *Dust Bunny*, a glorious small film by Bryan Fuller, and that night [it premiered] at Midnight Madness, people were just gobbling it up. Because it's so special, it's so personal. I feel the same way but on a much bigger scale with *Avatar*: you bring your whole self to it as a spectator.

Top to bottom: In *The Year Of Living Dangerously* (1982); Iconic Ripley in *Alien* (1979); Kicking ass in *Aliens* (1986); Seductive Dana (*Ghostbusters*, 1984); As Dr Grace Augustine in *Avatar* (2009); And now playing Kiri in *Fire And Ash*.

You couldn't have imagined a film like *Avatar* back on your first major movie, *Alien*, but your physicality is key to both. When you were younger, there was cynicism about a woman so tall — at six feet — making it. How did you make it so core to you as an actor?
I came from the theatre where that's all you have when you present yourself on stage — the last thing you want to do is hide as you come on; you have to embrace whatever you are. I had a very short mother, she was 5' 2, 3" — English, too! — and she used to say, "You're going to be so happy you're tall." And, of course, it was one of the many things I couldn't imagine when I was a teenager. But I did grow into it, and [as] my mother was very much an athlete, I have always found that strength in women is so attractive. I feel very lucky that I was able to go, "Alright, well, listen, I'm six feet tall, and I [have] big shoulders," and just pray that there'd be some crazy director there like Peter (*Weir, who directed Weaver in 1982's* The Year Of Living Dangerously). I always thought it took an unconventional director to think of casting me, and I was able to find a lot of those — it could easily have not worked out like that.

Years ago, Ridley Scott said of you when you came in for your audition for Ripley, "I knew this was her."
Oh, really? That's interesting. I really hadn't done anything — a couple of little scenes in an Israeli movie [*Madman*], which I've still never seen — but I had no idea what I was doing. And I remember I wore these very high 'hooker boots' because I thought, "Oh, science-fiction. I can have some fun," which meant that I absolutely towered over Ridley Scott. And more power to him that he didn't go, "Oh my God, this woman is grotesque."

I feel I was given jobs of playing women like Ripley who are in these extreme situations but [that] allowed me, as Kiri does, to use all the parts of me that are self-doubting. You know, you don't play a character like Ripley thinking, "I have the answers," and I decided that the first week of filming. I remember saying to [*Alien* co-star] Ian Holm, "Do you think Ripley really thinks what she's doing is right?" And he said, "Yes." And I said, "You know, I don't think she ever has that certainty. It's complete improvisation from beginning to end. She never feels like she's doing the right thing, or that there is a right thing, or a great path to some logical ending. It's all chaos. It's overwhelming, and all you can do is put one foot in front of another." And on *Alien*, I was literally doing that. I look back and feel very lucky, in a way, that I was fighting for my life, day to day — each day was so new to me. I tried not to think about the responsibility ›

Black structured coat: Yohji Yamamoto; Turtleneck bodysuit: Wolford

"I HAVE ALWAYS FOUND THAT STRENGTH IN WOMEN IS SO ATTRACTIVE."

and pretended I was doing a play. I had a lot of confidence in a certain kind of theatre, and so just thought, "Oh, this is such a strange movie. It's the Off-Off Broadway of movies."

You had 'character' roles in theatre: a schizophrenic, a woman with a hedgehog in her vagina... And in film, you didn't start out with supporting 'girlfriend' roles.
I think that would have really been the death of me, if I had to play girlfriend or best-friend roles. Some of those more conventional movies, if I'd had to pretend to be more normal — which I'm not really — I would have had a much harder time, because I would have been acting. Trying to act as someone who acts normal. I'm much better at playing a girl who keeps a hedgehog in her vagina than I am at playing someone who's going shopping with a friend. Although, I am playing Meryl Streep's best friend in a movie that's going to shoot at the beginning of 2026 [Joseph Cedar's *Useful Idiots*]. And that'll be fun! I mean, how rare is it to have two older women who are best friends, and have a history together? I'm delighted they're even having that in a movie, that's a shock. And so now, yeah, I'm ready finally to play the best-friend part.

But I'm curious about the argument still raging: how important is it that Ripley's a woman? For me, it's the least relevant thing. She's a complex human being — strong, good at her job and, sometimes, scared and vulnerable. Where do you come down?
I feel that one of the reasons Ripley endures as someone who even can inspire me if I need a little encouragement, is that she is an 'everyperson'. She is a human character. And you're right, [but] I think it was more significant when the movie came out — there had never been a survivor who was a woman. It was just unheard of. But as the years have gone on, I feel like the reason she's interesting to people is because, as you say, she's a *human being*, she's not all powerful. I always felt I was so in touch with my own vulnerability when I was playing Ripley. She didn't pretend it doesn't exist, she just had to keep going. And I feel like women certainly were looking to see that in films, but I also think people were just looking for a character who can navigate situations and come out of them and do it not in a super-human, Marvel way. I think we all see ourselves in characters like that [where] it's not easy. You have to survive this scene in order to get to the next thing. And I feel that that's the story of *Avatar,* too.

What James Cameron did with the script in *Aliens* is perhaps not dissimilar to *Fire And Ash*. Introducing grief and loss, these darker elements...
Yes, and I would say that with Oona Chaplin's character [Varang, leader of the Ash People] — a scary, unnerving character, [who's] so damaged from what has happened to her as an Ash Person — once again, Jim has created this incredibly strong, mesmerising woman character.

Do we learn the wrong lessons from these female characters? By trying to make them a model, a formula? We often hear in action that 'X' is the new Ripley?
I think it's what you said earlier: when Walter [Hill] and Dan [O'Bannon] wrote this character, they wrote her like a guy. And I think that's the secret to writing any character — you write the individual, and all these cultural requirements of what a woman should be sort of go. You know, it used to be the studio would say you have to be sympathetic. [And] sometimes they asked women to play characters of action, and then put them in some absurd costume. I was lucky because I was literally in a NASA suit Ridley and I found on the floor. And pretty much, Ripley gave me the freedom to say to directors, "I feel that the arc should be this; is this really true to the character?" I've always shot my big mouth off because as an English major, it's all about the story. I have these alarms that go off when something is fudged, and always feel the script is better for asking questions. I wouldn't abuse that privilege but as actors, it's our job to feel it way down in here.

There's such breadth to your work. There are franchises — you've got *Star Wars* coming up — and indies, and we haven't even talked about your comedies. If there is a thread, is it the writing?
Yeah, that's my compass; it's always the script. So [with] *The Mandalorian And Grogu*, it was not my intention to find a fourth franchise, I didn't ever imagine that I would enter the *Star Wars* world. But what's interesting about *Star Wars* now is they're no longer trying to do the *Star Wars* to end all *Star Wars*. They're letting the universe exist, and tell[ing] really interesting stories within that. I think Jon Favreau thought, "Okay, we want this very strong character. Let's make it a woman." I'm not sure it was supposed to be a woman. I think again, these days, they often think, "What do I need to do to make this seem more timely?", and now, because women are doing everything, hooray for us. [But] I just fell in love with the script and said, "I don't know anything about this world." Jon said, "Well, you can watch the series," and I said, "Oh, there's a series?!"

Is there a filmmaker you haven't worked with yet, something you *have* to make?
I might be doing a movie with this brilliant young director, Stephen Fingleton, whose first film, [2015 post-apocalyptic sci-fi thriller] *The Survivalist*, was one of the most terrifying things I've ever seen. I'm always delighted when directors think of me, because, in a way, you have to have an imagination; the *Alien* thing is so strong, you know? I did *The Tempest* [on stage] last year in London and think that's a great place to be an actor. There's such a belief in the job — which is to take you out of your world and leave you changed. To light up some parts of you that are dormant.

***AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH* IS IN CINEMAS FROM DECEMBER 19**

Right: As Colonel Ward in *The Mandalorian And Grogu*.

Burgundy vinyl coat: Stella McCartney; Bodysuit: Wolford; Trousers: Lafayette 148; Shoes: Jimmy Choo.
Additional imagery: Alamy, Disney

Styling: Sandra Amador at The Wall Group.
Make-up: Brigitte Reiss-Andersen using Armani, represented by A-Frame Agency.
Hair: Richard Marin with TMG using Oribe.
With thanks to Russ Lemkin.

WORDS
OLLY RICHARDS

MAKING HISTORY

OVER THREE FILMS SPANNING 130 YEARS, MICHAEL J. FOX AND CHRISTOPHER LLOYD FORMED A LIFELONG FRIENDSHIP. AS BACK TO THE FUTURE HITS 40, WE REUNITE THEM FOR A NOSTALGIC TRIP THROUGH TIME

"YOU MADE MY CHILDHOOD."

For decades now, people have been excitably approaching Christopher Lloyd and Michael J. Fox to offer some version of this declaration. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the release of *Back To The Future,* about as pure an embodiment of youthful wish-fulfilment as you could imagine, and its fanbase is only growing. People who sat in cinemas to watch the adventures of Doc and Marty, played by Lloyd and Fox, still hold the film close to their hearts. Many of those fans have now inducted children of their own. The childhoods to make keep racking up.

"It continues to amaze me how deeply the *Back To The Future* films affected young people," Lloyd says. "It still comes up all the time." He repeats, with something between bafflement and wonder: "'You made my childhood.'" Without missing a beat, Fox interjects, "And if you're fucked up, it's not our fault!"

For all the things in the movie's favour — Bob Gale and Robert Zemeckis' fleet-footed script; the latter's open-hearted direction — it's the chemistry between its leads that has seen *Back To The Future* endure. Doc and Marty are so instantly likeable, and Lloyd and Fox's connection so easy, that audiences never really questioned why a middle-aged eccentric and a schoolboy are hanging out together at night. The movie never explains it. It doesn't need to. We immediately believe these two have a shared history.

We're talking to Lloyd and Fox over Zoom — they're on opposite coasts of the US — and though they're both now men in their senior years, the dynamic is unchanged. Lloyd, 86, is avuncular, a little eccentric and unafraid to be earnest. Fox, 64, is charming, irreverent and quick to puncture the moment with a gag if anyone gets too serious. They're at complete ease with each other. Lloyd will often sit back in his chair and let Fox do most of the talking, laughing at every one of his jokes. Fox frequently puts himself down to talk his friend up ("Chris somehow looks 40 years younger") and steadfastly refuses to take any credit for the film's success.

We've brought them together to look back on a friendship that has continued well beyond the five years they spent making the trilogy, and an on-screen pairing that made little sense on paper yet has become one of the most beloved in cinema. "We didn't do anything to manufacture it. We didn't set out to do it," says Fox. "But I'm really proud to be part of the Doc and Marty team." Lloyd grins down the lens. Fox adds: "The Chris and Mike team."

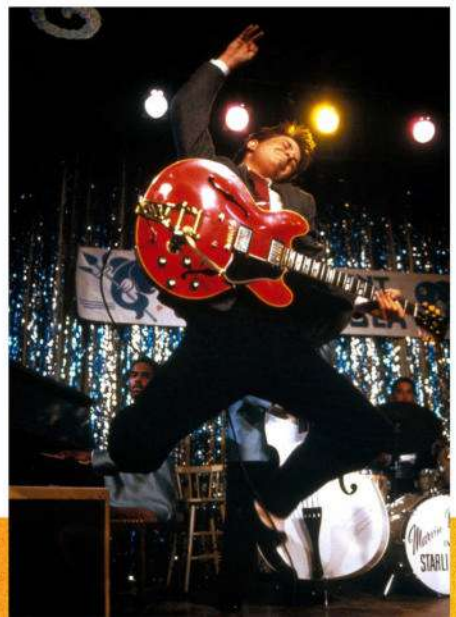
THE DOC AND Marty team cemented instantly. The Chris and Mike team took a while longer. When they first met, on the set of the first *Back To The Future* in January 1985, there was no time for palling around. There was no spare time for much of anything.

The story of Fox's casting is a well-worn anecdote. *Back To The Future* was already over five weeks into production when he joined. He'd been the first choice for the cocksure but vulnerable Marty, but his commitment to the hit sitcom *Family Ties* meant he had to pass. Eric Stoltz was given the role, but wasn't quite the right fit. After filming a good chunk of scenes, Zemeckis could see it wasn't working, Stoltz was let go and Fox hired, on the condition he didn't miss a minute of filming on *Family Ties*. So he spent his days shooting the show and nights on *Back To The Future*. Any remaining time was spent sleeping.

Fox remembers there being minimal ceremony to his first meeting with Lloyd. His *Back To The Future* journey began on a skateboard, rolling up to the Twin Pines Mall car park, spotting Doc's van in the distance. He and Lloyd barely had time to nod hello before shooting the rest of that sequence, where Doc reveals the DeLorean. "It was a lot of the usual preamble, working on blocking and stuff," says Fox. "Then we hit the marks and Chris comes in: 'MAAAARRRTTTTYYYY.' It was like, '*What am I in for*?!'"

He really goes for it on the impression. Fox has been living with Parkinson's since the early-1990s, which means he's in persistent involuntary motion and his facial muscles can't express in the way they once did. The condition has taken none of his ability to tell a story. "But I immediately fed off that energy," he goes on. "I loved it. I knew we were in sync straightaway. We had the same reality. On a movie like this, it's really important that everyone buys into the same reality. I got that it was crazy, Chris got that it was crazy, and we were crazy together." Lloyd is more succinct in his initial assessment of his new co-star: "He had the *flair*."

Everybody was stressed on that first film. Lloyd was worried about repeating a performance he'd already partly shot with Stoltz, anxious that his second try would be *at least* as good. Fox was consumed by sleep-deprived panic that he was going to be terrible, and that the movie might somehow turn out as bad as the media were predicting. "It was about surviving this thing,"



Clockwise from above: In 1955, Marty (Michael J. Fox) tracks down a dubious Doc Brown (Christopher Lloyd); Dangling Doc; Family ties: George (Crispin Glover), Lorraine (Lea Thompson) and Marty; The Twin Pines Mall experiment begins; Marty B. Goode; Uh-oh — an ominous sign.

he says. "There were so many setbacks, so many naysayers, so many brickbats thrown at it, and speculation in the press that it was this big disaster." He and Lloyd were run ragged. "We didn't talk that much," says Fox. "We'd pass each other at the craft-service table or grab midnight hotdogs. But we had so much to do on camera that we didn't have time for anything off camera."

Their first real social time together was shortly after shooting wrapped. They were brought to San Francisco to hear Huey Lewis' songs for the movie and drinks were arranged. "We were in this hotel and we got really drunk," says Fox (he quit drinking in 1992). "I remember the director of Bond was there (*this would have been the John Glen era*) and Bob Zemeckis was very excited he was there. I was just drunk enough to introduce them."

It was a night to toast their on-screen partnership, and one of the last before the rest of the world would see it. For now, nobody had any real concept of what they'd just done. It seemed like it had gone well, but who could really tell? Lloyd recalls a question, deep into the festivities. "There was a group of us sitting around, probably around two or three o'clock in the morning," he says. "Huey Lewis, who I hadn't really met before, kind of just ambled over. He looked at us and said, 'So, is this going to be anything?'"

BACK TO THE Future's success was instant. It was the highest-grossing movie of 1985, but as time went on Fox could see it was becoming more than that. "It could have been *just* a big movie that summer," he says, "but it was clear that wasn't going to happen. The movie hung on. For the next five years, from one to two (Part II *was released in 1989*), while I was still doing [*Family Ties*], I was living with this every day. It just became a huge thing." The success of the first film made Fox one of the hottest young stars in Hollywood, in a permanent spotlight he largely enjoyed. But constant attention becomes tiring, which may explain why he and Lloyd truly became close on *Back To The Future Part III,* which was shot back-to-back with *Part II*. It was the first time Fox could take a breath and appreciate the experience.

"Chris carried that picture," says Fox. "And he was wonderful in it. I just got to enjoy his work and not feel pressure on myself." While the first two films are fully centred on Marty, the third shifts focus to Doc, who's been zapped back to the Old West and fallen for a fellow science nerd, Clara (Mary Steenburgen). Roles reverse and now Marty becomes the one helping his friend get his life on track. "Coming into *III* was like the home stretch," says Lloyd. "It was, 'Okay, let's have fun now.' There was a little bit of abandon, which felt great." ›

Alamy, Getty Images, Universal

Left: Lloyd, director Robert Zemeckis and Fox perch on the DeLorean while making *Part II*. **Below left, top to bottom:** Roads? Where they're going, they don't need roads...; Marty and levitating time machine; Doc sports his 2015-style lab-garb. **Below:** Saddling up for the Old West-set *Part III*. **Right:** Lloyd and Fox enjoy reminiscing at New York Comic-Con in 2022.

"We began talking about things other than work," says Fox. They chatted about Lloyd's career before *Back To The Future* — Fox repeatedly mentions how good Lloyd is at Shakespeare — and discovered common ground despite their very different starts in life. "He's from a very old-society, corporate, Gilded Age-type family," says Fox. Lloyd's grandfather was one of the founders of Texaco, the oil company. "I came from poverty — well, not poverty, but from no means... From our opposite corners of the world... He became an actor, much to the surprise of his family, and I became an actor, much to the surprise of my family." They learned about each other's stories before, as Fox puts it, "we found ourselves in a parking lot in Pomona in 1985, doing this ridiculous scene with a DeLorean."

In a way, they were going through exactly what Doc and Marty experience in the third film. In the first, Doc and Marty are more colleagues than friends, a mad scientist and his sidekick trying to fix a screw-up. By *Part III*, they realise how much they mean to each other. "It's about the nature of the relationship between the two guys," Fox says. And it cemented the relationship of the two guys playing them. "We'd been through all you might go through," adds Lloyd. "The chemistry never faded. We didn't lose our focus, but that last film was kind of a celebration."

At the end of that celebration, they were no longer just work friends, but lifelong pals. "We had the shared experience of what this work meant to us and how it changed our lives," says Fox. "I have a relationship with Bob Zemeckis,

who I love, but Chris and I were in the trenches. We were there at four in the morning when Bob was getting us to do something for the 99th time. I could just look over at Chris and he'd look at me and it was just like... 'Fuck.'"

Lloyd was the only other person in the world who knew exactly what that "Fuck" meant.

PLAYING A 'DEFINING ROLE' is a mixed blessing. There inevitably comes a point where you get tired of talking about it. Ask the cast of *Friends* or anyone who's played 007 and they'll tell you they had a period of wishing people would see them as a person, not a character. Fox says there was a time when he was, if not actually fed up with Marty, resistant to participating in the fans' passion for him.

"When I was first asked to do all these comic-cons, I would just dismiss them," he says. "It was like, 'No, I don't wanna do that.' Then I thought, 'Why not go and check one out?' I became so touched by the tattoos on people's asses — of my face — and people lining up for hours to basically photobomb a picture with me and Chris." He now appears at conventions fairly regularly. "If originally I thought I'd do it for the fans... it became about thanking them for what they've given me."

Fox and Lloyd will occasionally unite at the same conventions — you can imagine the reception — and though both, like Zemeckis and Gale, have refused any possibility of further films or reboots, they've joined forces for the odd project. In 2014, Lloyd made a guest appearance on the short-lived sitcom *The Michael J. Fox Show*. In 2021, both appeared in *Expedition: Back To The Future*, an extremely cute mini-series in which Lloyd hunts for the film's original DeLoreans to raise money for Fox's charity, The Michael J. Fox Foundation For Parkinson's Research. They're not *resigned* to the fact they'll always be Doc and Marty. They're profoundly grateful for it. "It's hard to exaggerate what a privilege it is to be part of so many people's lives," says Fox. "I get really moved by it."

After 40 years, there seems to be no deceleration in the films' popularity, especially the first. People still gather to watch it on the big screen. Alan Silvestri's score is performed at concerts across the world. It's been turned into a hit stage-musical, currently playing in London's West End, and until recently on Broadway. Fox doesn't believe this is all just about nostalgia. He thinks the series is not only still relevant, but perhaps more relevant than it's ever been.

"I was thinking about this a lot today," he says. "I was thinking about bullies. We live in a bully culture right now. We have bullies everywhere — you don't need me to point the finger at who, but there are all these bullies. In this movie, Biff is a bully. Time is a bully. For me personally, Parkinson's is a bully. And it's all about how you stand up to them and the resolve that you take into the fight with them. It's about your resilience and your courage. I think there's a lot to that right now. I think a lot of people are responding to the movie because it strikes chords they wouldn't otherwise recognise."

Fox is, again, quick to undersell his own part in the success of any of this, as if he's just been along for the ride. He says he and Lloyd will "at least be a footnote in the history of showbusiness". They probably know that's vastly understating it. Their chapter in cinematic history is written. Time will continue to bully, but there's no erasing their place in it. Two guys whose friendship seemed highly unlikely and carried them across more years than either would have ever imagined. Doc and Marty. Chris and Mike.

"It's always just... clicked," says Lloyd.

"It's a real thrill and a real privilege to work with him," says Fox. "I love being his friend. Let's keep doing this until the 50th anniversary."

DELOREAN DELIGHTS

THE SPACE-AGE CAR'S OTHER CINEMATIC CAMEOS

BEVERLY HILLS COP (1984)

Despite their iconic status, only about 9,000 DeLoreans were actually made before manufacturers DMC scrapped their futuristic sportscar and went bust. If you look closely, however, you will see one appear opposite Axel Foley's beaten-up Chevrolet Nova in Foley's first outing — a whole year before *BTTF* hit cinemas!

THE WEDDING SINGER (1998)

It's a truth universally acknowledged (or rather mostly just by us) that *The Wedding Singer* is the best '80s movie of the '90s. And the classic Adam Sandler romcom reaches peak 1985 in the moment Drew Barrymore's Julia steps into a DMC-12 that has the *Miami Vice* theme song blaring. Tubular!

READY PLAYER ONE (2018)

In a movie jam-packed with more Easter eggs than a Chocoholics Anonymous drop-in, it takes something truly special to stand out from the crowd. Parzival/Wade (Tye Sheridan) rocking up to Halliday's (Mark Rylance) first challenge and putting pedal to the metal in a KITT-modded, flux-capacitor rocking, hover-converted DeLorean is truly special.

THE LEGO MOVIE 2: THE SECOND PART (2019)

The LEGO Movie 2's most shocking moment comes when Rex Dangervest (Chris Pratt) reveals himself to be an evil future-version of our hero Emmet. But just how exactly did Rex get back from the future? Using a spaceship built out of parts from cinematic time machines, of course — including, naturally, Doc Brown's ol' faithful DMC-12. **JORDAN KING**

final cut

SPOILER WARNING

A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

DECEMBER 2025 | EDITED BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

After Earth

EMPIRE TALKS TO **ALIEN: EARTH** CREATOR NOAH HAWLEY ABOUT MAKING THE XENOMORPH GREAT AGAIN

WORDS **JAMES DYER**

NOAH HAWLEY IS no stranger to playing with other people's toys. From his reimagining of the Coens' *Fargo* into a quirky anthology series, to his acid-trip *X-Men* riff with *Legion*, Hawley has developed a talent for taking a beloved property and twisting it into something entirely new. While *Alien: Earth* started with an homage to Ridley Scott's original seemingly ripped straight out of the '70s, it soon coalesced into its own star beast entirely, as Hawley told a *Peter Pan*-inspired tale involving hubristic trillionaires, vengeful cyborgs, and a group of children in synthetic adult bodies, led by Sydney Chandler's Wendy, who might be the most dangerous creations of them all. There have been more than a few awkward misfires in the *Alien* series, but Hawley's precision-tooled series proved a sight for sore eyes.

Or should we say eye? Because rather than the familiar Xenomorph for whom the series is named, it was an entirely different foe that captured viewers' imaginations. Species 64 or Trypanohyncha Ocellus — essentially an eyeball on tentacles — proved the breakout star of *Alien: Earth*, manipulating human and alien alike for its own oblique ends. "The Eye is the Lorne Malvo of space," says Hawley, referencing Billy Bob Thornton's demonic antagonist from *Fargo*'s first season. "It just wants to create chaos." Now that *Alien: Earth* has finished its first season (with more, hopefully, to come), *Empire* sat down with Hawley for a debrief. Eyeball to eyeball, naturally.

The Eye is one of four new monstrosities you created for the series. What guidelines did you give yourself when dreaming up a group of aliens that could upstage the Alien?
I needed to have this sense of a zoo — I refer in the show to the HMS Beagle and Darwin and collecting specimens from around the galaxy. I settled on four creatures, which felt like it gave me enough of an ensemble that over the course of one or two seasons, you could continue to discover new things. As we see with The Eye, it's a very strategic thinker. It's often doing things not to help itself in the moment, but knowing that by destabilising the environment and the humans, it's going to ultimately get what it wants. This one actually is the one we should really worry about — the others are more like animals, or insects.

What's your reaction to how the series has been received?
I've been a little overwhelmed by it, honestly. I think if you gave the *Alien* title to almost anybody else, nobody would have landed at *Peter Pan* as a way in. When you take a big swing like that, it's always a little shocking to look around and realise that everyone is there with you. I work so hard within these franchises to do original work and to be recognised as an original storyteller, because I do believe that that's what fans want. They want great innovation within the franchises that they love and if you can deliver that to them, it elevates the meaning for them.

You got Sigourney Weaver's official seal of approval as well.
Seeing Sigourney Weaver out there raving about the show makes my day. She emailed me a couple of days before the premiere to say that she was excited that it was me doing it. I've never met her — it was out of the blue. And of course, this is like a note from God on some level, right? I wrote her back and I said, "I do

Above: The Xenomorph in all its liquid glory. **Left:** Andy Yu (Teng) and Babou Ceesay (Morrow) on set with *Alien: Earth* showrunner/creator Noah Hawley.

this for a living and after 20 years I know that we show up and we make great things Monday to Friday. But for me, you'll always be 30 feet tall on a screen saying, 'Get away from her, you bitch!'"

The fifth episode, which you directed, tells us how the crew of the spaceship Maginot met their untimely ends, and has been particularly singled out for praise.

One of the reasons that I wanted to do that fifth episode, which is my classic *Alien*-movie episode, was the last 15 minutes: the complexity of moving pieces and the number of creatures who are not contained and the mystery of the sabotage created a level of unpredictability that I haven't really seen in the franchise before. You don't know what's going to happen next. Crazy shit is happening! There's a guy biting a Xenomorph! Things are just out of control and my hope is that the ›

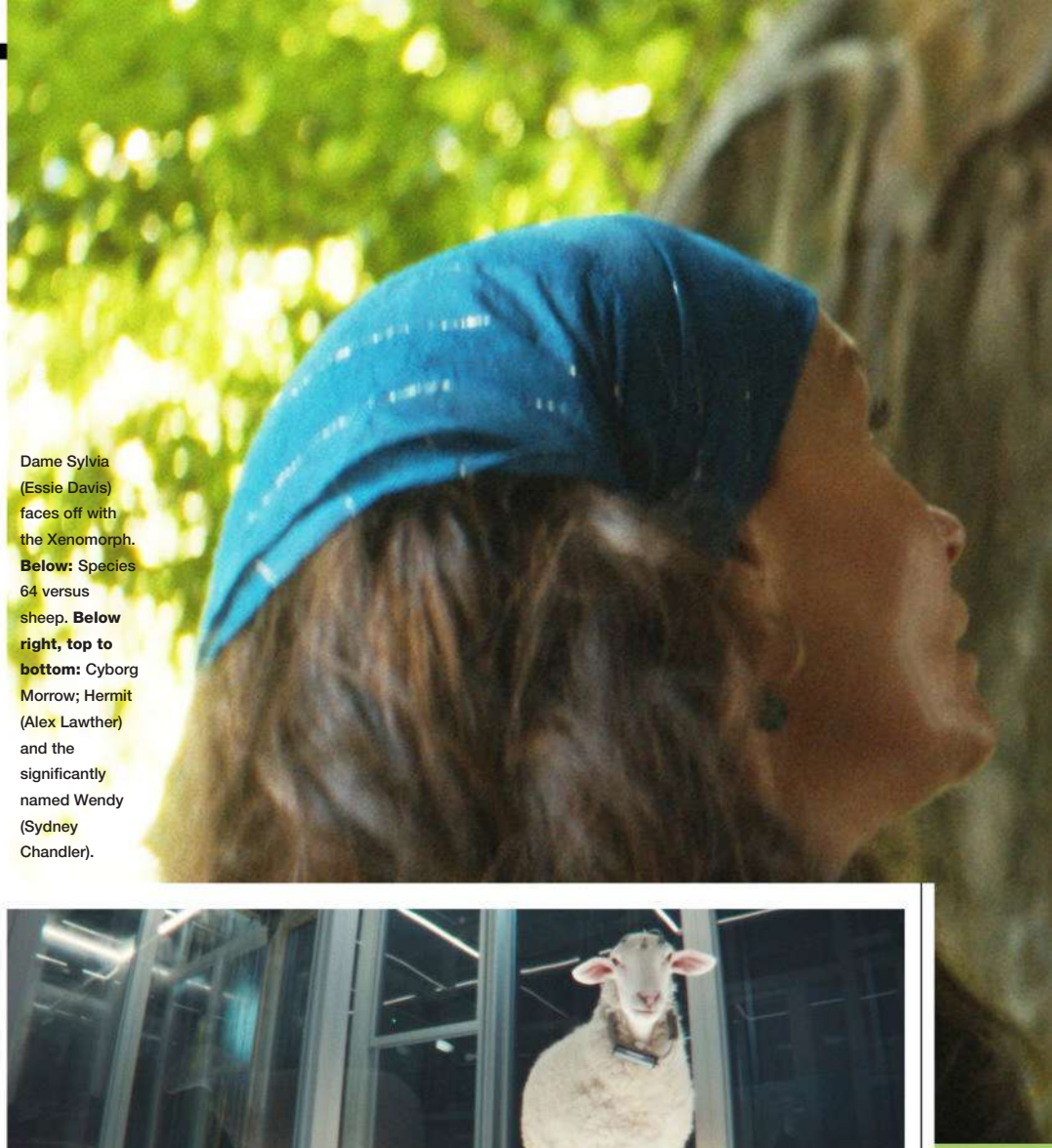
possibility of what *Alien* can be is suddenly expanding at a geometric rate.

You're far from a stranger at tinkering with beloved franchises, but *Alien* is one that's arguably gone wrong more than it's gone right. Was that intimidating?
I suppose I should be intimidated by it but I don't tend to be. Look, the road to hell is paved with good intentions, but I do feel like as long as my heart is pure and I'm looking for substance within these stories, then, you know, if I'm gonna get in trouble for that, I guess I'm okay with it.

This has been a good year for prequels. In the *Empire* review, we called it "*Andor* for aliens". How do you feel about that comparison?
Tony [Gilroy] did an amazing job with that, turning it into a serious meditation on authoritarianism and and rebellion. I think these titles can be really fluid and dynamic. You create a state of mind: *Star Wars* is a state of mind, *Star Trek* is as well. And we want to live in those states of mind. We want to feel those feelings again. That's all I try to offer.

One of the things that you've done here is exactly what *Andor* did: you've made us look at the source material with fresh eyes. Because now, when you see the instructions to investigate the planet in *Alien*, or the boardroom meeting in *Aliens*, knowing what they know makes it absolutely chilling.
You want to offer people a new context or points of view without being too clever about it. I did what everyone did and when Season 2 of *Andor* was over, I watched the movie [*Rogue One*]. It leads right into it and *that* movie makes you look at *Star Wars: Episode IV* in a different light. I'm not trying to hijack and redefine what Ridley and James Cameron did, I'm just offering some context.

Would that be your goal? That people would watch this and then at the end of the final episode of the final season segue straight into the original *Alien*?
Yeah, potentially. I mean, you'll never be able to take away the originality and the power of Ridley's movie, which really invented a new genre on some level. Where *The Shining* starts with ominous music and dread from the first frame, Ridley Scott's movie starts with mundanity. They're waking up, they're eating breakfast. And he does it for 30-plus minutes! You really just settle in and you're like, "Huh, I guess I'm just gonna watch a movie about space truckers." There's no obvious payoff in the set-up, and then of course they go to that planet and the movie shifts on you. There's something in the tension between that mundanity and the horror that makes the horror something you're not prepared for.

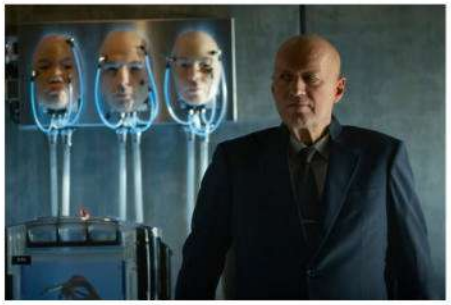


Dame Sylvia (Essie Davis) faces off with the Xenomorph. **Below:** Species 64 versus sheep. **Below right, top to bottom:** Cyborg Morrow; Hermit (Alex Lawther) and the significantly named Wendy (Sydney Chandler).

What it does have, which you replicate in the show, is that sense of creeping dread.
Yeah, which is hard to know, right? As a filmmaker I can make myself feel every emotion except fear. So that tension, that suspense, that is a best guess on my part. The show is very character-forward. When I went to create it, I thought, "Well, the first thing I have to do is take the monster out of it," and so we have this show that exists without the monsters, as a drama. And then you think, "Okay, now how do I use the monsters to make this dramatic story better and richer?" But I'm always aware of, "Well, is there enough monster?" And allowing myself to invent these new creatures allowed me to bring real unpredictability to the audience. To go, "Oh, I don't like this. Why is that sheep looking at him? What does this fly do? Wait, that thing lays its eggs in your drinking water?!" That discovery is so critical; that sense of not knowing what's gonna happen is where your imagination really kicks in.

How do you want people to react to this season's final moment, "Now we rule..."?
At some level it's an underdog story, right? Wendy and these children, they were terminally ill and then they were saved, but they come to realise that, well, you're saved, but you're property now. I think it's very satisfying in an *Alien* universe, in which the individual is always at the whim of the corporation, to see an act of rebellion. At the same time, they're children and they don't always think things through. There isn't necessarily a long game. And there is a hubris to Wendy believing that maybe this Xenomorph can be good. I think that moment of, "Now we rule," is such an exhilarating moment for the audience. And then the question is... well, it was an exhilarating moment when Dustin Hoffman ran out of the church and they got on the bus [in *The Graduate*]. But what comes after? The ships are coming and all they have is problems. I mean,

"Sigourney Weaver raving about the show made my day."



Above right, top to bottom: Brit national treasure Adrian Edmondson as Atom Eins; Wendy on the run; Tech bro Boy Kavalier (Samuel Blenkin) with synth Kirsh (Timothy Olyphant).

my son can't even pick up a towel from a hallway floor, right? How are they going to solve this?

Wendy's ability to communicate with the Xenomorph is a big thread throughout this season. As a concept, that could have been kind of goofy. Did you worry about introducing that?

That moment really stuck with me from Cameron's movie where Ripley is in the egg chamber and the Queen calls the drones off and there's some level of communication going on there. This child has this ability to hear these creatures and clearly communicate with them, although it's not clear how she knows what she's saying to them. And it's not necessarily a good thing. I think about [films like] *Pan's Labyrinth*: you're given this ability to to enter this monster world, but usually that doesn't end well for people, right?

On the subject of sound, Smashing Pumpkins, Queens Of The Stone Age and Metallica are now officially all *Alien* canon, because you end each episode with a '90s grunge/metal banger. For people of a certain age, that was pure catnip. What was the thinking there?

Well, I'm just gonna say: "I see you, man. I see you." I see all of the *Alien* fans driving around in their vans with a Frank Frazetta painting on the side. I know the records that you owned, the CDs that you owned. I want this show to be arena rock. And so I gotta play arena rock. I wanted to end each episode with a big feeling, a throw to next week. There's a bit of a cliffhanger, and so I was like, "I'm gonna call in the big guns here." I love that each week when that song kicks in, the hair stands up on the back of your neck.

Where would you like to take the show next?

I'm interested in exploring the corporate politics of it. As we've seen, there's an irresistible gravitational pull toward monopoly that corporations and billionaires have. There's a bit of *Game Of Thrones* to the corporate world that feels interesting to me. I do think this story of these children's autonomy continues to be the heart of the show, but *Alien* is always about levels of containment. The island is a level of containment and what happens when you expand past that level? Ultimately, the show is called *Alien: Earth*. I know that, given the canon, I can't blow up the Earth, but I do think that containment is going to be very hard to maintain. If it was just a monster movie, I don't think there would be much to say. But because it's a story about humanity trapped between nature that's trying to kill us and the technology we've created that also seems to be trying to kill us, that feels a lot like the world that I live in, and so I feel like there's a lot there to really grapple with.

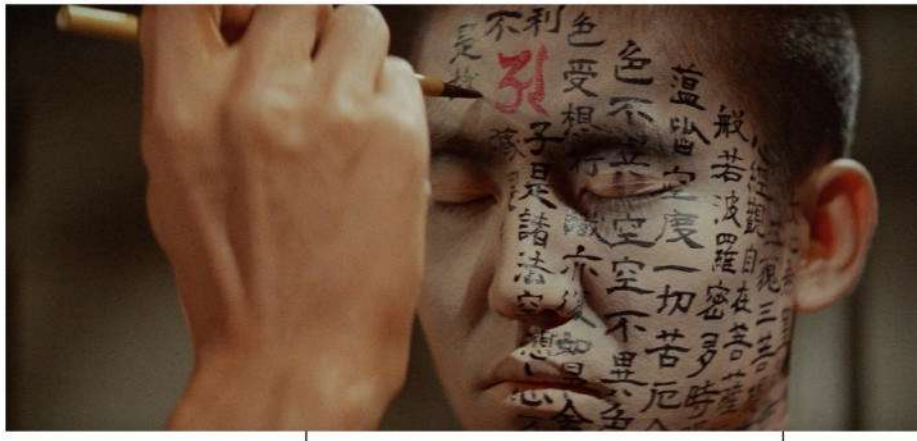
***ALIEN: EARTH* IS ON DISNEY+ NOW**

THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

Kwaidan

MASAKI KOBAYASHI'S HUGELY INFLUENTIAL JAPANESE HORROR

WORDS **ADAM SMITH**



Above: Segment 'The Black Hair'. **Right:** Segment 'Hoichi The Earless'.

DEVOTEES OF 007 may recall *You Only Live Twice*, and the moment when Bond suavely attempts to explain the Japanese concept of '*kiri-sute gomen*' to a deeply unimpressed Blofeld. "Spare me the Lafcadio Hearn," the SPECTRE boss snaps. For most audiences, the literary allusion would have sailed straight over their heads — they were, perhaps, more interested in whether Kissy Suzuki had made it intact from Ian Fleming's pages to the big screen. But for those in the know, it was a nod to a fascinating, if slightly marginal, figure in the literature of the uncanny.

Lafcadio Hearn was a Greek-Irish journalist who, after stints in America and the West Indies, moved to Japan in 1890, reinvented himself as Yakumo Koizumi, and dedicated his life to chronicling the country's folklore and ghost stories. His best-known collection, *Kwaidan: Stories And Studies Of Strange Things*, was a publishing sensation in his adopted country — which had largely neglected such folk tales — and later, riding the craze for all things Japanese ('*Japonisme*') that followed the 1900 Paris Exposition, in Europe. (Fleming was one such foreign admirer, enough to not only namecheck the writer but, it is said, to base Blofeld's appearance on him — the villain's missing eye mirroring Hearn's disfigurement.)

Sixty years after Hearn's death, the tales fell into the hands of director Masaki Kobayashi, best known at the time for his anti-war epic trilogy *The Human Condition*. With *Kwaidan* (1964), Kobayashi transformed four of Hearn's ghost stories into a visually sumptuous, languidly paced and utterly bewitching cinematic masterpiece: one that Guillermo del Toro, one of a host of contemporary directors of the fantastic influenced by *Kwaidan* in one way or another, described as "one of the most perfect films, artistically, I have ever seen".

Kwaidan declares its manifesto from the start with a title sequence in which black and then brightly coloured inks swirl across the screen: the writer meeting the visual artist. The traditional framing device, established as a template for anthology movies by Ealing's *Dead Of Night* in 1945 and then repeated in Amicus offerings such as *Dr. Terror's House Of Horrors* (1965) and later George A. Romero's *Creepshow* (1982), is absent. Instead, we dive straight into the tales — or rather into the *world* — as *Kwaidan* is a film that eschews any kind of realism in favour of heightened, theatrical, sometimes hallucinatory visuals and a sparse, unnerving soundscape.

The stories themselves share little in common, and there is no linking narrative thread. The first, 'The Black Hair', has an unemployed *samurai* heartlessly ditching his poor wife in favour of a rich noblewoman, only to regret his decision and attempt to return to his past. 'The Woman Of The Snow' features a young woodcutter making a promise to a vengeful spirit, and inevitably breaking it. 'Hoichi The Earless', the most ambitiously staged and subtly moving of the tales, has a blind musician compelled to endlessly play for the ghosts of a long-past battle. The film concludes with what, given the length of the preceding yarns, feels like an *aperçu*: 'In A Cup Of Tea', a tale in which a *samurai* sees the image of another man in his tea, only to later meet said spirit in real life. If there is a connecting theme, it is of the awful cost of betrayal, but also of the plight of the tiny human, trapped in a world ruled by mysterious forces beyond their understanding or control.

Bankrolled by Toho and shot in its glorious Tohoscope, *Kwaidan* was at the time the most expensive movie ever made in Japan. When Kobayashi found that there were no soundstages in the country large enough for his sets, he repurposed old World War II aircraft hangars in Kyoto, transforming the 1,100-yard-long

Left: Masaki Kobayashi sprinkles his film with unsettling, hallucinatory images. **Below:** Segment 'The Woman In The Snow'.

Alamy, Apple TV

interiors into temples, villages, haunted cemeteries and, for 'Hoichi The Earless', an ocean on which a full-scale naval battle is fought. Halfway through production, the film ran out of money, forcing Kobayashi to borrow from friends and eventually sell his house to ensure completion. (The production used so much dry ice for its fog effects that the suppliers sent Kobayashi a lavish Christmas gift.)

If nothing else, you can see where the money went. The scale of the sets is breathtaking, but it is Kobayashi's sublime use of colour, particularly in the skyscapes, that really makes an impact. Vast cycloramas enclose the characters; in some scenes, strange unblinking eyes and Lovecraftian constellations stare down pitilessly upon them. A snowstorm in 'The Woman Of The Snow' blasts through the artificial forest, the trees whipping frantically in the wind, only for the same forest to be transformed into a burning, hallucinatory orange when autumn arrives. A rainstorm drenches a temple in 'Hoichi The Earless' (as devotees of Kurosawa know, nobody does rain as well as the Japanese).

Meanwhile, Toru Takemitsu's score — an abstract, atonal soundscape — is spare and unnerving. Processed sound and traditional Japanese instruments are paired with long periods of silence to generate an eerie, tense atmosphere. "I wanted to create an atmosphere of terror. But if the music is constantly saying, 'Watch out! Be scared!', then all the tension is lost. It's like sneaking up behind someone to scare them. First, you have to be silent," Takemitsu later said.

Kwaidan was a critical success in both Japan and the West, even in the truncated two-hour cut in which it was initially released, winning the Special Jury Prize at Cannes and garnering a nomination for Best Foreign Language Film at the 1966 Oscars. But its gargantuan budget made it a financial liability for Toho and irreparably damaged Kobayashi's reputation in the conservative Japanese film industry. Despite this, *Kwaidan's* influence endures. It's not much of an exaggeration to say that J-horror owes Kobayashi a sizeable debt. Without *Kwaidan*, there might be no *Ringu*, no *Dark Water*, no *Ju-On*. Just as Lafcadio Hearn's stories initially awakened a thirst for Japanese ghost stories in the West, Kobayashi's magnificent film ensured they would haunt cinema for decades to come.

***KWAIDAN* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

1 THE LOST BUS

OUT **NOW / APPLE TV+**

After a couple of missed stops (*The News Of The World*, *22 July*), Paul Greengrass is back on board with this intense true-life tale about a school bus trying desperately to punch through a Californian wildfire. The last hour, in particular, as a sweaty, determined Matthew McConaughey drives through peril after peril, is Greengrass at his best.

2 A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

OCTOBER 27 / BLU-RAY

The first (and, in my opinion, best) pairing of director David Cronenberg and star Viggo Mortensen is a modern Western that sees the latter as a family man whose possibly dark past comes crashing into his idyllic life. A nasty piece of pulp, also notable for great guest turns from Ed Harris and William Hurt, who got Oscar-nominated for a third-act cameo which leaves no scenery unchewed.

3 NIGHTMARE ALLEY

OUT **NOVEMBER 3 / BLU-RAY**

Guillermo del Toro's bleak and beautiful dive into film noir gets the Criterion Collection treatment, with a brand-new director's cut in glorious black and white, for maximum misery. Bradley Cooper is excellent as a con man who… well, as the title tells us, this won't end well. Filled with some fabulous flourishes from del Toro, it's one of his best films.

4 A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET COLLECTION

OUT **OCTOBER 27 / 4K**

Speaking of nightmares, 4K Freddy Krueger (that's KKKKrueger, surely) is reason enough to get this latest box set chronicling the rise and fall (and rise again) of cinema's greatest, and possibly only, scar-faced, razor-fingered, dream-dwelling murderer. Highlights: anything that Wes Craven was involved with (*1*, *3*, and *7*). Welcome to prime time.

SPOILER SPECIAL

Elio

GOING DEEPER INTO THE OFF-WORLD SECRETS OF PIXAR'S SCI-FI

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

IT'S EASY TO dismiss *Elio*. With a worldwide take of just $153 million, the latest Pixar movie has not reached the heights of its studio siblings commercially, and it's made little cultural impact. Perhaps that's as a result of an unsettled production process, which saw directors Domee Shi and Madeline Sharafian parachuted in to take over from Adrian Molina, or perhaps audiences just weren't interested in an original story about a young boy (Yonas Kibreab) who finds that his dream of becoming abducted by aliens comes true. But while it's not top-tier Pixar, there's a great deal of charm and heart here. We asked Shi, Sharafian and producer Mary Alice Drumm to talk us through some key moments...

NOW, VOYAGER

In the opening moments, we are introduced to Elio, an orphan living with his aunt Olga (Zoe Saldaña). Disconnected and disconsolate, Elio stumbles upon a museum exhibition dedicated to Voyager 1, the NASA space probe that, even now, is still hurtling through space. "We were super-inspired by Voyager," says Shi. "All these nations came together to do this really cool thing, and it felt like a beautiful symbol of hope. Elio's really connecting with Voyager and feeling, 'I am Voyager, I am this little satellite, I'm gonna go look for life out there.'"

COME, FRIENDLY ALIENS

Inspired by this, and unable to connect with his aunt, Elio decides that his best course of action is to leave Earth. Luckily, Aunt Olga works for the military, and Elio is able to send a message into space, asking for nearby aliens to abduct him. This, as with quite a bit in the movie, was not the original plan. "When me and Maddie joined, we kind of added the concept of a boy who wants to be abducted by aliens," says Shi. "We thought that was such a funny and unique but somewhat relatable idea of a kid that wants to escape Earth and find his people."

ATTACK OF THE CLONE

Successfully abducted, Elio is brought to the Communiverse, a conglomerate of highly advanced and peaceful aliens who are under the impression that Elio is the leader of Earth. In order to maintain appearances back home, a clone of Elio is made and sent to live with Olga, who immediately becomes suspicious of his deeply odd behaviour, showing the audience just how keenly attuned she is to Elio. "We needed to see how Olga was changing over the course of the movie," says Shi, "and how she was going from sceptic to believer. This seemed like a really fun device to bring her to Elio's side."

HAIR-RAISING STUFF

There are plenty of clear cinematic influences on *Elio*. Some of those are obvious, from Robert Zemeckis' *Contact* to Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*. But there's an unexpected body-horror angle here too, with the directors looking to John Carpenter's *The Thing* for inspiration, most notably where a single strand of the clone's hair goes on the prowl. "Everyone was so excited to try to animate the hair," says Sharafian of the sentient strand, which slithers around in a way that could give impressionable young viewers nightmares. "It's a little light introduction for the kids," laughs Shi, "and once they get older, they can investigate these movies."

ELIO ON THE MENU

Meanwhile, up in space, Elio meets Glordon (Remy Edgerly), the son of warmongering alien Lord Grigon (Brad Garrett), and the two form an instant bond. Never more so than in the moment when, in order to protect the very flammable Elio from a lava river, Glordon pops him into his mouth. It's something of a Pixar first. "I think you're right," chuckles Sharafian. "Buzz has never done that." That sequence came from one of the film's animators, Ken Kim. "He showed Domee and Maddie a test where Glordon, to hide Elio, swooped down and ate him," says Drumm. "We thought it was so funny, then Maddie had the idea for the whole scene."

WHAT A LOAD OF HAM

"Pixar has a ham-radio club," says Drumm. "It's up on the roof, and people use it. We didn't know that 'til we made the movie." She's talking about ham radio (or, given that this is Pixar, Hamm radio) because, with Elio banished back to Earth and intergalactic war seemingly inevitable, the day is saved in the most lo-fi way imaginable: a worldwide network of ham-radio operators — known as The Masters Of Ham — rally round to help Elio, Olga and Glordon pilot a ship through a field of deadly space debris. "We hint at radios at the beginning," says Sharafian. "But he was only using his radio to send signals up and away from everybody else. At the end, it's those other people, who have been there the whole time, who save him. It gives you hope that when he does go back to Earth, he's going back to this network."

ELIO'S CHOICE

Finally, Elio is presented with a choice: stay in the Communiverse, or return to Earth. He chooses the latter. Or, more accurately, he chooses a life with Olga, the surrogate parent who has finally made a connection with him *in extremis*.

Interestingly, when Shi and Sharafian came on board, Olga wasn't actually Elio's aunt. "Olga used to be Elio's mom," explains Sharafian. "And we kept running into the narrative issue of, well, his life on Earth doesn't seem that bad." One seemingly simple tweak changed everything. "If they were mother and son, you kind of believe that these two characters are going to stay together, no matter what. But once she was his aunt, he really is choosing her at the end of the film, and he's trying life again on Earth."

FINAL CONTACT

Twice in the movie, a recording can be heard of the legendary astronomer and scientist Carl Sagan. The first time is when Elio discovers the Voyager exhibit. The second comes right at the end of the film, when we hear Sagan's musings repeated ("Are we alone?"), but now with an extra emotional punch. "When we found that quote, we were just trying to get into Elio's headspace," says Sharafian. "We were really inspired by that passage. Then we had the idea, 'Let's put it at the end of the film.' The challenge for ourselves was, can we believe that that character would answer that question completely differently?" A most sagacious choice.

***ELIO* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL AND DISNEY+**

The Scream King

SAM NEILL ON HOW HE BECAME AN ACCIDENTAL HORROR HERO

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

SAM NEILL IS many things — actor, wine expert, national treasure in at least three different countries — but he never considered that he's something of a horror icon; a Scream King, if you will. "I've been in work for 50-something years," he reflects. "Someone said I've made 90 movies. The odds are there'll be some horror amongst it."

And yet, the Kiwi actor's impact on horror, and vice versa, is undeniable. This Halloween, you could do a lot worse than programme a Neillathon of the third *Omen* film, *The Final Conflict* (1981), Andrzej Żuławski's *Possession* (1981), Paul W.S. Anderson's *Event Horizon* (1997), and John Carpenter's *In The Mouth Of Madness* (1994), which this month gets the 4K treatment and is ostensibly the reason why *Empire* is Zooming with the actor from his Australian home. It stars Neill as John Trent, an insurance man who finds reality fracturing as he investigates the disappearance of a missing horror author. "It's not for me to say, but I've read that it was the last great Carpenter film," says Neill, who had worked with the director on *Memoirs Of An Invisible Man* in 1992. "When he offered me this, I jumped at it. He's eccentric, in a very endearing way. And I liked the story, and I like the opportunity to go nuts."

In fact, *Possession*, *Event Horizon*, and *In The Mouth of Madness* all see Neill go doolally in wildly different ways. "I'm happy to be nutty," laughs Neill. "It gives you a lot of liberty." *In The Mouth Of Madness* begins and ends with Trent in scant possession of marbles. The end sees him cackling away in a cinema as he watches the film he's in, and memorably begins with Trent being committed to a psychiatric hospital. "That's the stuff I remember vividly, because you had a licence to do whatever you wanted in there," he says. In fact, Neill had a direct influence on one of the film's greatest jokes, in which music is piped into Trent's cell. "John had the Stones playing on a constant loop," he recalls. "I said to John, 'If you put the Carpenters on constant loop, it would only take me three minutes to go mad.'" And that's how 'We've Only Just Begun' — aka John Carpenter's the Carpenters — ended up in the movie.

Those three movies were also all commercial and critical disappointments when they came out, but have since fought the good fight and are now well regarded, particularly by horror fans. Although Neill is still somewhat disappointed with *Event Horizon*, in which his seemingly heroic scientist, Dr William Weir, eventually becomes a scarred, nude, eyeless conduit for an ageless, interdimensional evil. (Don't try this at home.) "When you're naked and covered in blood, and it's mid-winter, and you're freezing to death, it's really hard to be scary," he says. For him, that applies to the finished film. "There's a much better film in there somewhere. It's a letdown from what we shot, and that's largely because it doesn't have that suspense that is absolutely necessary in horror."

Possession, though, is widely seen as a

Alamy, Arrow Video, Universal

Clockwise from main: A bloodied Dr William Weir in *Event Horizon* (1997); Alongside Julie Carmen in *In The Mouth Of Madness* (1994); As Antichrist Damien Thorn in *Omen III: The Final Conflict* (1981); Monster success with *Jurassic Park* (1993); With Isabelle Adjani in *Possession* (1981).

masterpiece. The Berlin-set movie sees a fractured marriage between Neill and Isabelle Adjani disintegrate into an apocalyptic, deeply terrifying psychodrama featuring some of the rawest, most disturbing performances in the entire horror canon. "Isabelle is quite extraordinary in it, and I thought we made a good partnership in the film," says Neill. "The famous scene in the underground tunnel where she has a sort of miscarriage or something, it's not entirely clear what, they shot that before I shot anything. And I went to the dailies and watched her performance, and thought, 'My God, this is more extreme than anything I'd imagined.'"

"I'm happy to be nutty. It gives you a lot of liberty."

Neill shot that movie back-to-back with *Omen III: The Final Conflict*, in which he played Damien Thorn, the Antichrist, as a smooth, sinister politician. Neill had been turned onto the part by, of all people, James Mason, who saw his performance in Gillian Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career*, and became something of a fairy godfather. "I got this phone call and this very recognisable voice said, 'Hello, I'm James Mason, we think you should be working abroad,'" laughs Neill. "'I'll introduce you to my agent, who would like you to audition and test for *The Omen III*.'" To this day, Neill doesn't entirely know what Antichristy qualities Mason saw in him. "I don't think it was particularly that he wanted to see me in *The Omen*, but that he wanted to see me in the movies," he says. But when he got the role, he decided to play Thorn as "the loneliest man on the planet".

For the record, Neill would also like Phillip Noyce's excellent thriller, *Dead Calm*, to be considered as a horror. "That could be in there somewhere," he says. "It's about what you can't see, what's on the other side of the door." (In that case, it's Billy Zane being a nutjob.) Controversially, though, Neill does not consider *Jurassic Park* to be a horror. "It's more science-fiction," he says. "Although the thing that might qualify it is Laura Dern screaming."

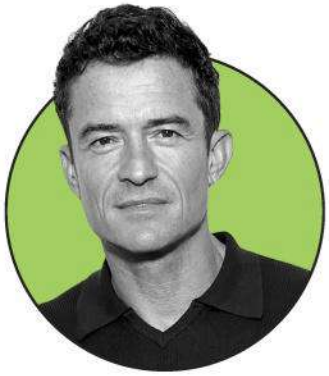
While far from a horror nut, Neill likes to dabble from time to time. "I like a good horror film, of course I do," he says. "I think a good film's a good film, whatever the genre." He grew up in 1950s New Zealand without a TV, so wasn't exposed to images of Karloff, Lugosi, Lee, Cushing and their ilk. But he does remember the first horror icon that terrified him. It was, um, Doris Day, in a film called *Midnight Lace*. "She's being monstered by this bloke," laughs Neill. "I went with my best friend, Bill Nutt. It was the day that school broke up. And there's this sequence where she's stuck in the lift, and this guy is trying to get in to kill her, and we were all screaming in the cinema."

Maybe, subconsciously, that's a feeling Neill has been trying to evoke in audiences ever since? "I never thought that I'd be in a movie, let alone a horror movie," he laughs, swatting away our amateur analysis. But all this talk of horror has got him interested in putting the willies up people once more. "If someone sends me a nice script, I'll read it very seriously," he says. Get writing, get sending, people: the Scream King is ready to return to his throne.

***IN THE MOUTH OF MADNESS* IS OUT ON OCTOBER 27 ON 4K BLU-RAY**

Time Capsule

Orlando Bloom



THE INTREPID STAR ON HIS STORIED CAREER

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

"I FEEL OLD," laughs Orlando Bloom (who's only 48). For the last half-hour or so, *Empire* has shown Bloom a succession of photos from his impressive CV. Quite a few of those come from Bloom's incredibly fertile period in the early 2000s, when he was the Next Big Thing, swashbuckling it up a storm in the *Lord Of The Rings* movies, *Pirates Of The Caribbean* and its sequels, and more. And each picture from the halcyon days has elicited a look of horror. "I was so young, and so wet behind the ears, and probably in a permanent state of anxiety in one form or another, but pretending I wasn't," he says. Now, Bloom is experiencing a second bloom as an excellent character actor (see this month's *The Cut* for details), and you sense this is just the beginning. "The best," he says, "is yet to come."

SPARRING PARTNERS
THE CUT (2025)

"Caitríona [Balfe] plays my life partner and training partner, and we're going through our daily training routine. This kind of work as a partnership helps with the headspace as much as it does with the life stuff. One of their love languages is working out and training. Caitríona was amazing. We had to learn those routines, and it wasn't easy to do what she's doing there. It's like learning a dance routine. We shot this in the Peacock gym in the East End, a famous old boxing gym that's now used mostly as a location."

TROLL-HUNTING
THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING (2001)

"This is one of those moments that will never be forgotten. The cave troll was a ball on the end of a stick, and I was reacting and interacting with that. I was like, 'Pete [Jackson], is this gonna look scary?' He was like, 'Don't worry, it'll be really scary.' This is the way we were blocked. I think the idea was that I was firing arrows through the door, and then it all kicks off. There were so many huge moments. This was one of the first, I think. We were aware that the stakes were high."

FOND FAREWELLS
THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING (2003)

"Oh my God, this is hilarious. 'And he still never said Legolas' — that was a joke that was going around. This was bittersweet. It was beautiful. It didn't come right at the end of filming, but it was towards the end. All of us together had had such a good time, being together and performing together, and being here for this moment. And everybody was cleaned up. That was unusual, because we'd all be inside, dirty and messy. I mean, look at Viggo — he looks positively elven."

Alamy, BBC, Getty Images, Republic Pictures

A PIRATE'S LIFE
PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL (2003)

"The first movie was my favourite of all those movies, just because it was so new, and we were in uncharted waters. I think this is where Jack [Johnny Depp] is standing up and saying, 'This is the moment you will always remember as the moment that you nearly caught Captain Jack Sparrow,' and then he dives off. Keira [Knightley] was so young, and wonderful as Elizabeth. It's funny that we're together here, because we're apart the whole time. We're all so young, it's wild when you see it. I was about 24, 25. It's like looking at an old Errol Flynn picture or something."

THE MASKED MAN
KINGDOM OF HEAVEN (2005)

"Ah, Ed Norton. He had this amazing idea to play that whole part with the mask. (***Empire:*** *"He was uncredited on this movie."*) Was he? Wow, interesting. I'm a huge fan of Ed's. He was wonderful, and super-committed. I thought that mask was really clever. I think I was 27 here, so young to be number one on the call sheet for Ridley Scott. I probably felt out of my depth most of the time. Somehow, that managed to play into what the character of Balian was going through anyway. Bill Monahan, the writer, and I were neighbours and we'd spend a lot of time hanging out. He'd always say, 'Ridley still says this is one of his favourite movies, and he wishes he'd just released the Director's Cut.' I don't know how much truth there is to that, but the Director's Cut is definitely the version that plays."

AH, PARIS
TROY (2004)

"Oh, wow. (*Adopts very haughty posh voice*) 'Paris, darling.' (*Sarcastically*) My favourite. I didn't like playing him. When you play a character, you want to find things about the character that you love. [But] I struggled with Paris, because he's such a showboat, without any real *cojones*. I remember saying to my agents, 'Guys, he's got to grovel at the feet of his brother.' And they were like, 'Oh, that'll be the making of you.' I was like, 'Really?' But I remember a funny Peter O'Toole (*who played Priam, Paris' father*) story. We had this scene at the top of some stairs, and he was walking up, maybe, 100 stairs. He had a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, and an AD [assistant director] next to him said, 'Hey, have you ever thought about quitting cigarettes?' And he went, 'No, but I've thought about quitting stairs.'"

BLOOMING FUNNY
EXTRAS (2006)

"Basically, I went to see Ricky [Gervais] and Stephen [Merchant], because I really wanted to work with them on this. The first script they came up with was really funny, and I said, 'Why don't you push it really far? I must be the butt of so many jokes. I'm like the pin-up, the most this, the most that.' So they really went to town with it. I don't think I was ever on the top of any of those lists anymore. And here I am, trying to impress her [Maggie, played by Ashley Jensen], and she's just so unimpressed. It was very fun to play. I hadn't done anything like comedy before, and at the end when she says, 'You just don't do it for me,' or something like that, Ricky said, 'All you have to do is just look off, just take your eyeline up and away, as if you don't care.' I'm so glad I did it."

CROSSING SWORDS
PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: DEAD MAN'S CHEST (2006)

"This was awesome. Everyone got a little clip on the finger every now and again, but I don't think anyone got too badly injured, thankfully. I'm fully in pirate costume and mode. I love that costume. I've still got it somewhere. This was in Exuma, Bahamas, where there was a sandbar that would go up and down with the tides, that we got ferried on and off from. The water was just turquoise, and we were right out there, like on the edges of the Earth. It was super-unique and cool, very rock and roll. And we end up on a wheel, going upside and down and around. It was ambitious, to say the least. It was ingenious. Gore [Verbinski, director] was so clever with that stuff, coming up with these wild ideas."

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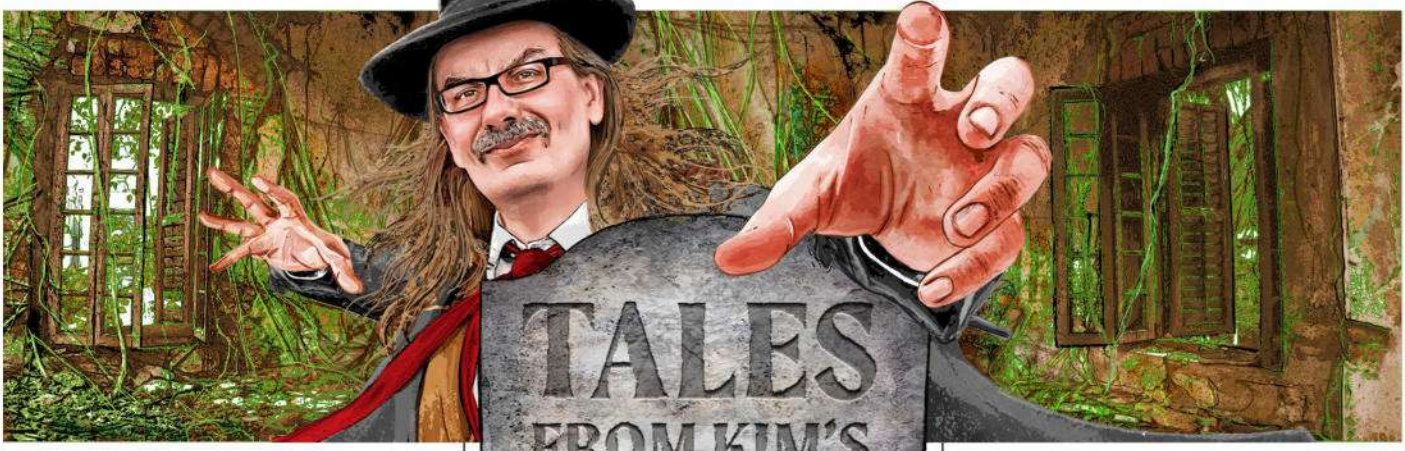

TALES FROM KIM'S CRYPT

LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC KIM NEWMAN BRINGS US HIS UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA

MATTHEW BRAZIER

THIS MONTH

DOUG McCLURE VS DINOSAURS

IN 1974, AMICUS Productions was Hammer's rival in low-budget British horror, known for anthology films like *Dr. Terror's House Of Horrors* (Christopher Lee pestered by a crawling hand; Donald Sutherland marries a vampire) and *Tales From The Crypt* (Joan Collins stalked by Santa; Sir Ralph Richardson as the Crypt Keeper). Producer Milton Subotsky had ambitions to move into fantasy adventures drawn from pulps, comics and 1940s Saturday matinée serials. He was so far ahead of his time, he wanted to make *Spider-Man* in the 1960s, with Bob Dylan as Peter Parker.

Subotsky secured rights to novels by Edgar Rice Burroughs, creator of Tarzan, and hired Kevin Connor — fresh from the excellent anthology *From Beyond The Grave* — to direct and science-fiction writer Michael Moorcock to adapt (and update) the novel *The Land That Time Forgot* (1918), about a U-boat which strays into the waters of an Antarctic island where dinosaurs, cavemen and other wonders still exist. Ray Harryhausen, the leading dino-effects man of his day, was unavailable (and expensive), so Amicus turned to Derek Meddings, who'd worked on *Thunderbirds* and other Gerry Anderson puppet shows, for miniatures. Roger Dicken, who'd go on to create the "small alien forms" for *Alien*, was selected to make the dinosaurs (criticised at the time as glove puppets, but using techniques which would become standard for monster-making in the 1980s). The mixed crew of German and British sub-mariners, who are more likely to kill each other than be eaten by a T-Rex, are played by familiar British character actors (some putting on accents — at least one dubbed by Anton Diffring) and Susan Penhaligon sports several wet jumpers... but Burroughs' hero was American he-man Bowen Tyler, so a Yank 'name' was required to star.

Amicus told Connor it had hired the star of hugely popular TV Western *The Virginian*. He expected James Drury, who played the all-in-black Virginian (the original man with no name), but got Doug McClure — part inspiration for Troy McClure on *The Simpsons* — who played the hero's enemy-turned-sidekick, Trampas. In comparison with nine-season juggernaut *The Virginian* (1962-'71), *Star Trek* struggled through just three seasons before cancellation — yet there isn't now a streaming platform wholly devoted to *Virginian* spin-offs. The waters might have closed over *The Land That Time Forgot* in the same way, but its 1970s box-office success (kids loved it!) led to many reissues and TV screenings. It had follow-ups (*At the Earth's Core*, *Warlords Of Atlantis*) and a direct sequel (*The People That Time Forgot*), and even throwaway remakes from the Asylum (one directed by C. Thomas Howell). Yes, those puppetsaurs can't compete with Harryhausen's *One Million Years B.C.*, but I like *The Land That Time Forgot* more than at least four of the *Jurassic* movies (including one of Spielberg's).

Subotsky was right in 1974. The next big thing would be films in the spirit of old-time serials and pulp-magazine adventures — *Star Wars*, *Superman*, *Raiders*, *Conan* — and many *Before Time* cast and crew went on to be in those franchises. But not, sadly, Doug McClure.

Top: The dino who greeted punters on the *Land That Time Forgot* cinema lobby card. **Bottom:** Doug McClure in action.

Alamy

CRYPT KEEPERS

KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

CONSECRATION

DIGITAL

This Catholic-themed horror mystery has one great bizarre moment — a pullback reveals a priest being tortured by nuns jumping on a board laid over his chest. Priest Danny Huston and nun Janet Suzman are so devout, they act like Mafia goons around possibly cursed hero Jena Malone.

HELL OF A SUMMER

DIGITAL

Written and directed by actor pals Billy Bryk and Finn Wolfhard, this genial take on woodland slaughter has non-threatening Jason (Fred Hechinger), a 24-year-old who still lives for summer camp, trying to cope as counsellors hare off to get killed by a masked psycho. Formula horror with sweet comedy chops.

HIGH ROLLERS

DIGITAL

A sequel to amiable tosh *Cash Out*. Bald John Travolta and sadly sidelined Gina Gershon undertake an *Oceans'*-type casino caper, though it's a Vegas vacation on a Blackpool budget. Trav and crew — some acting like competition winners rather than pros — play high-stakes poker and rifle several safes.

THE MAN IN THE WHITE VAN

DIGITAL

In 1975, Madison Wolfe can't convince her parents that a sinister van is up to no good... when the driver finally pounces, she resists. Warren Skeels' slow-burn stalker has nostalgic detail (older sister Brec Bassinger crucially ties up the phone gossiping) and a terrifically suspenseful finale.

PROTEIN

DIGITAL

Traumatised ex-army drifter Sion (Craig Russell) — a vigilante cannibal serial-killer — sets off a gang war in a down-at-heel Welsh town. Too many British grungy crime movies are ridiculously dour, but Tony Burke's tough little kitchen-sink horror is given pep by sly, macabre humour.

STORY OF THE SHOT

Modern Times

CHAPLIN'S RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

WORDS **IAN FREER**

THE ORIGIN

As a 12-year-old boy, Charlie Spencer Chaplin worked for three weeks at Straker's, a London printing and stationery firm. On his first day, faced with a 20-foot-long Wharfedale printing press, he became a nervous wreck. "He felt the enormous machine was going to devour him," says Jeffrey Vance, film historian and author of *Chaplin: Genius Of The Cinema*. "This fear never left him."

More than just staying with him, the scare inspired one of the most memorable images in a career littered with indelible moments. Partly inspired by the mechanised Ford plant in Detroit where workers succumbed to mental-health issues, *Modern Times* (1936) sees Chaplin's Little Tramp character working on a manic production line at the Electro Steel Corporation. Suffering a nervous breakdown, the Tramp throws himself down a chute into the bowels of the factory and is pulled through a series of cogs and wheels. "He knew this was going to be a great set-piece and an important image to sell the film," says Vance. So, he hired the best in the business to envisage it.

THE SHOOT

Chaplin filmed the journey into the belly of the steel beast at his own studio in Hollywood in autumn 1934. The creation of the factory set was supervised by British-born art director Charles 'Danny' Hall, who was also responsible for the castle in Tod Browning's *Dracula* and the laboratory in James Whale's *Frankenstein*. The factory interior, known by the crew as the Dynamo Room, was made of wood and rubber and painted to look like steel.

Rumour — well, IMDb trivia — has it that Chaplin only did one take of the action as it was so painful. But according to Vance, Chaplin "was a perfectionist, and he shot it several times. If you watch the scene very carefully, you'll notice that at a certain point he's holding onto a rope to pull him through the cogs, to lace him through the machinery." While the rest of the industry had moved into sound, Chaplin stayed in the silent medium, allowing him to undercrank the camera and speed the Tramp's journey up. "It looks effortless," says Vance. "It probably went very slowly but then undercranking gave it a little zip and pep." The film was subsequently reversed

© Roy Export S.A.S

to depict the Tramp's return journey.

Commentators have been quick to note that the Tramp's sojourn is similar to that of film threading through a projector. "People have imposed that on there," says Vance. "I'm sure that was at the back of his mind. That just makes it all the more brilliant."

THE LEGACY

Shot over 90 years ago, the set-piece remains astonishingly prescient. "We all feel we are being controlled by technology," says Vance. "Chaplin understood this. I think he wanted us to rebel against the tyranny of the machine." The image has been parodied by cartoons, both animated (*The Simpsons*, *Futurama*) and live action (Mike Cheslik's *Hundreds Of Beavers*), but remains unique. "Chaplin is so inimitable that you just behold it, wonder at it, admire it," says Vance. "You can copy his set-pieces, but you can never imitate him." Don't even think about it, AI.

***MODERN TIMES* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

Main: Cog in the machine: Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp.

INSTANT TRIVIA

1

The filming of *Modern Times* took 147 days, with 263 days of pre- and post-production. Amounting to 410 days, the production time was relatively short for a Chaplin feature film.

2

The total cost of production for the movie was $1.5 million.

3

Chaplin also wrote the score for *Modern Times*. One of the melodies was given structure and lyrics and turned into the song 'Smile' for the film's 1954 reissue. Sung by Nat King Cole, it became an American songbook standard.

4

Modern Times also bids a fond farewell to Chaplin's Little Tramp character, the film acting as a tribute to both the persona and the fading silent era in general.

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

THE COASTAL HOTEL ARTISTS

OR HOW WE EMBARRASSED DIRECTOR AND CO-WRITER WILLIAM BRIDGES

With Special Thanks to
JULIA BRIDGES • ELODIE BRIDGES • TABATHA BRIDGES • ALLAN BRIDGES
OLIVER HARVEY • JASON SPRINGATE • ANDY PARKIN • LOUISE PARKIN
WILL GARTHWAITE • DAVID O'DRISCOLL • BUBSIE YATES • DAVID WHITEHOUSE
TONY CHRISTIAN • CAROLINE HILL • AMELIA JACKSON • DANIEL MARTIN • DAVE OLROYD
The Coastal Hotel Artists
No person or entity associated with this film received payment or anything of value,
or entered into any agreement, in connection with the depiction of tobacco products.
The persons and events in this motion picture are fictitious.
Any similarity to actual persons or events is unintentional.

THE END CREDITS of *All Of You* — the romantic drama in which Brett Goldstein and Imogen Poots find that they may or may not be each other's soulmate — throw up one of the most interesting Special Thanks we've seen since this column began. Who, or what, we wondered, are The Coastal Hotel Artists? We turned to the film's co-writer and director, William Bridges, for answers. "I don't know," admits Bridges, with a faintly embarrassed laugh. "But we didn't actually shoot in a coastal hotel. We used a house that we turned into a posh getaway place, and maybe there was a group of artists that did the paintings on the walls."

Thankfully, Bridges put us in touch with the film's production designer, Luke Moran-Morris, who solved the mystery sharpish. "The tenant of the coastguard cottage we hired is called Daniel Clarke, The Pilgrim Potter," says Moran-Morris, speaking of the film's finale, where Goldstein and Poots have one last rendezvous. "When we arrived to recce, he was getting ready for an exhibition [called Unapologetically Here] at the cottage. I liked some of the pieces so much, I asked if we could feature them in the film."

The Coastal Hotel Artists are also thanked individually in the credits. Although, it is becoming clear, not by Bridges, who couldn't remember who they were. That's not his only credits faux pas either. "I've accidentally not thanked someone that was in the movie," he smiles. "There's a scene where you can see two women walk away, and all you can see is their bums. They're my mates, and I put one of their names in there, and my other mate was like, 'Where's my name?'" An oversight for which Bridges must atone. Luckily, Special Thanks To… is here to help. "Thank you, Claire Martin," he says, and then adds, "Thank you, Claire Martin's bottom." Remember, Claire, there's no such thing as a bad credit. **CHRIS HEWITT**

***ALL OF YOU* IS OUT NOW ON APPLE TV+**

The Ranking

The *Final Destination* series

FOUR *EMPIRE* WRITERS TAKE ON THE DEATH-CENTRIC FRANCHISE. WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

RUSSELL MOORCROFT

Marco Vittur

OUR CRITICS

CHRIS HEWITT
Hasn't left his flat since the first movie.

HELEN O'HARA
Is very careful when flagging down a bus.

MIKE MUNCER
The only fair ride he dares go on is the teacups.

BECKY DARKE
Sees a logging truck, throws it into reverse.

Chris: So, then: *Final Destination*. Time to rank the franchise before they make 7, 8, 9 and 10 in the wake of *Bloodlines*' success. How do you feel about it?

Helen: I have moderate feelings. I watch them. I'm like, "Hey, that was clever," and then I forget they ever happened. It's a franchise that has basically refused to evolve very much.

Chris: Like, where do the visions come from?

Mike: The joy is not knowing. What Helen is talking about is a feature, not a bug. It's not bogged down in mythology, or exploring the origins of certain characters. You just get this incredible thrill ride every time.

Helen: But it hasn't even explored different groups of people up until *Bloodlines*. It's all been teens and twentysomethings, with a token adult thrown in.

Chris: This is a franchise that knows exactly what it is, and knows that it has, right from the off, cracked a magical winning formula. And why fuck with the formula?

Becky: That's why *Bloodlines* came back as such an enormous success this year. What fans want is a fantastic opener, and then incredible set-piece after set-piece, followed by the best ending of any of the films.

Chris: That's interesting that you think it has the best ending.

Becky: I'm already second-guessing myself, because obviously *5* is the best one. But I wasn't expecting such an incredible payoff. I left the cinema cackling.

Chris: It's a wonderfully blackly comedic ending. But I think it's one of the things the franchise could stand to change. I do have an issue with how bleak and nihilistic the movies have gone, where they're killing off everyone to serve purely as a punchline. Going forward, I'd like a bit more variation on that.

Mike: It does take the stakes out a little bit. But the magic of these films is that, while the whole concept of them is grim, they're so much fun. I don't think anyone comes out of *Final Destination* movies feeling like they've just come out of *Hereditary*. You don't care that your main character has died at the end.

Chris: I think that's a bug, not a feature. But why are we still talking about this franchise?

Helen: I think it's the audacity of the opening disaster, and the invention of the deaths.

Chris: There's a universality to the idea of dodging death.

Mike: Of getting your innards sucked out of your ass in a swimming pool.

Helen: We've all been there, same with malfunctioning MRIs and genital piercings.

Chris: The filmmaking can be a bit rudimentary, but six films in, it's very rare for a horror franchise to have a batting average like this. There are five good *Final Destination* movies. I don't know how many *great Final Destination* movies there are — I don't think anything's knocking on the five-star door — but there's only one true stinker. Maybe that's why people keep coming back.

Becky: The pacing is, on the whole, very good. They are deliciously short.

Chris: *The Final Destination* is 82 minutes.

Becky: And yet feels like the longest. At their best, they run on from one set-piece to another. People come for the kills, right? And then at the other end of it, you get something like *3*, where it gets so ponderous. I've got no interest in characters having a debate. When is somebody gonna get shot through the face with a nail gun?

Mike: It's interesting because when the first movie came out, it was marketed as a scary teen movie. And it takes itself pretty seriously. And then by the second movie, it's basically taken the Miss Lewton death sequence from the first film, and created a film of those incredible mousetrap deaths. The first one is its own, completely different thing.

Chris: The deaths aren't played for laughs there.

Becky: I may be showing myself up here as a proper sicko, but when Terry gets hit by that bus, the timing is perfect.

Chris: That bus hit is something the franchise has struggled to top ever since. But I would advise you not to go back and ask yourself, "How did that bus take that corner at that speed?" Because there is no way.

Becky: Sandra Bullock was driving it.

Helen: I actually think *5* was clever in setting up that final twist of the flight. I had not picked up that nobody has a modern mobile phone.

Chris: The twist in *5* is incredible, where it folds back on itself and the survivors end up on the plane that blows up in the first one. It's so much better than I remembered. But again, it's so hopeless and bleak.
Becky: It's the one *Final Destination* movie that makes me genuinely feel something.
Chris: Hit me with your favourite deaths.
Helen: I enjoyed — "enjoyed" is the wrong word — the wire fence flying through the air in *2*.
Chris: *2* has most of my favourite deaths as well.
Mike: For me, the beauty of *Final Destination* is working out where it's going to come from. My favourite, for that reason, is the gymnastics one in *5*, where it goes on and on. An incredible set-up, an incredible payoff.

Becky: They really leaned into it in *Bloodlines*, with this unnatural focus on inanimate objects. Chekhov's lawn mower, Chekhov's barbecue skewer.
Helen: A similar one is the beauty-parlour death in *4*, where there's all this stuff that she gets through, and it's a stone that gets her.
Mike: *4* was really disappointing for so many reasons, but that payoff felt really underwhelming.
Helen: I put *3* as my weakest of the lot. It just feels really tired, really lazy in the writing. We start getting gratuitous boobs for no reason.
Chris: Yes, but the match cut from the overhead shot of the two girls burned alive in their sunbeds to their coffins is possibly the greatest match cut in the history of cinema. I'm sorry, Stanley Kubrick.

Mike: *2* has my favourite opening disaster. It's the freeway pile-up. It's got the best build-up, and it's probably the most relatable. And it's beautifully orchestrated.
Helen: I agree. The first one maybe suffered from coming after *Fight Club*, which also has a terrifying plane crash in it. So I was a little less horrified by it.
Chris: It works for me. It gives me the old clammy palmies. I still can't get on a plane without looking for harbingers of doom.
Helen: *5* and *Bloodlines* have something very important to say about the lack of maintenance on American infrastructure, and lack of building codes and regulation.
Chris: *Bloodlines* has the longest opening by some stretch. It feels like a short film in itself. And there's so much going on there. The song, the glass floor, the piano, the dreadful kid, the coin. Okay, let's finish off with our overall favourites.
Becky: The first one. No matter how good sequels are, if I enjoy the first one, nothing's going to surpass it. It came at a time when slashers had had their second wind, they had petered out, and along came *Final Destination*, which made Death the killer.
Helen: I think *2*. It's got the best opening, lots of the best deaths, it builds on the first one without going completely crazy.
Chris: Same for me. Although I love *Bloodlines*, not least because it finally explained Tony Todd's character, and gave him a beautiful send-off.
Becky: I cried real human tears. The ones that don't have Tony Todd's Bludworth are the worst ones in the series.
Mike: A lot of the things Becky said about 1, I would apply to *2*, actually. It was this breath of fresh air, and it wasn't bogged down in *Dawson's Creek* angst. It was, "This is what this franchise is."
Chris: And we haven't even mentioned the mum getting her head cut off in the lift! Although I don't like when someone else is partially responsible for a death. I feel that third parties should not be involved.
Helen: The tanning salon would be on the hook for wrongful-death lawsuits.
Chris: The hospital in *Bloodlines*! Two people died in your MRI room!
Mike: Also, what was that setting on that MRI machine?
Chris: I think it was 'dick-ripping'. "Why is there a dick-ripping setting on this machine?"
Becky: "Don't worry about it, don't worry about it."
Chris: Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

AGREE? DISAGREE?
WRITE IN AND TELL US AT:
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THE TOP SIX

1.
FINAL DESTINATION 2 (2003)

2.
FINAL DESTINATION (2000)

3.
FINAL DESTINATION: BLOODLINES (2025)

4.
FINAL DESTINATION 5 (2011)

5.
FINAL DESTINATION 3 (2006)

6.
THE FINAL DESTINATION (2009)

The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY ISSUE, WE WILL TEST YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE. ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

THE HALLOWEEN FRANCHISE

1 Only one *Halloween* film does not feature Michael Myers. What is it called? Full title needed here, please.

2 What is the name of the evil toy company that is featured in that movie?

3 Who played Michael Myers — named The Shape in the credits — in John Carpenter's original 1978 movie?

4 Thirteen (nice) *Halloween* movies have been made in total. How many of them feature Jamie Lee Curtis as Laurie Strode?

5 Who played Laurie in the two *Halloween* movies that were directed by musician/filmmaker Rob Zombie?

6 Who is the first person to die (well, be murdered by Michael Myers) in the *Halloween* series? (You get a bonus point if you can name the actor!)

7 Brian Andrews, Paul Rudd and Anthony Michael Hall have all played the same character in the *Halloween* movies. What is that character's name?

8 Noted director Jim Cummings cameos as an ill-fated police officer in which David Gordon Green *Halloween* movie?

9 Which *Halloween* movie ends — supposedly definitively, at least at the time — with Michael Myers' head getting lopped off?

10 What is the name of the Illinois town in which the *Halloween* movies (and murders) principally take place?

11 In Gordon Green's *Halloween Ends*, Michael is overshadowed, in terms of screen time and kills, by a new character played by Rohan Campbell. What is the character's name?

12 Complete this quote from Donald Pleasence's Dr Sam Loomis: "I met this six-year-old child with this blank, pale, emotionless face, and..."

13 What connects Judy Greer and Josh Hartnett in the *Halloween* movies?

14 With a worldwide gross of $259 million, which is the most successful *Halloween* movie at the box office?

15 Which director is missing from this list of *Halloween* directors? John Carpenter, Rick Rosenthal, Tommy Lee Wallace, Dwight H. Little, Dominique Othenin-Girard, Joe Chappelle, XX, Rob Zombie, David Gordon Green.

16 In the Carpenter- and Curtis-free *Halloween 4: The Return Of Michael Myers*, Michael's young niece comes to prominence. What is her name, and who played her?

17 Carpenter directed the first *Halloween* (and composed the music). But who co-wrote the screenplay, and produced the movie?

18 In which *Halloween* movie does Myers single-handedly take out a heavily armed mob of inept vigilantes, contributing to the franchise's highest body count?

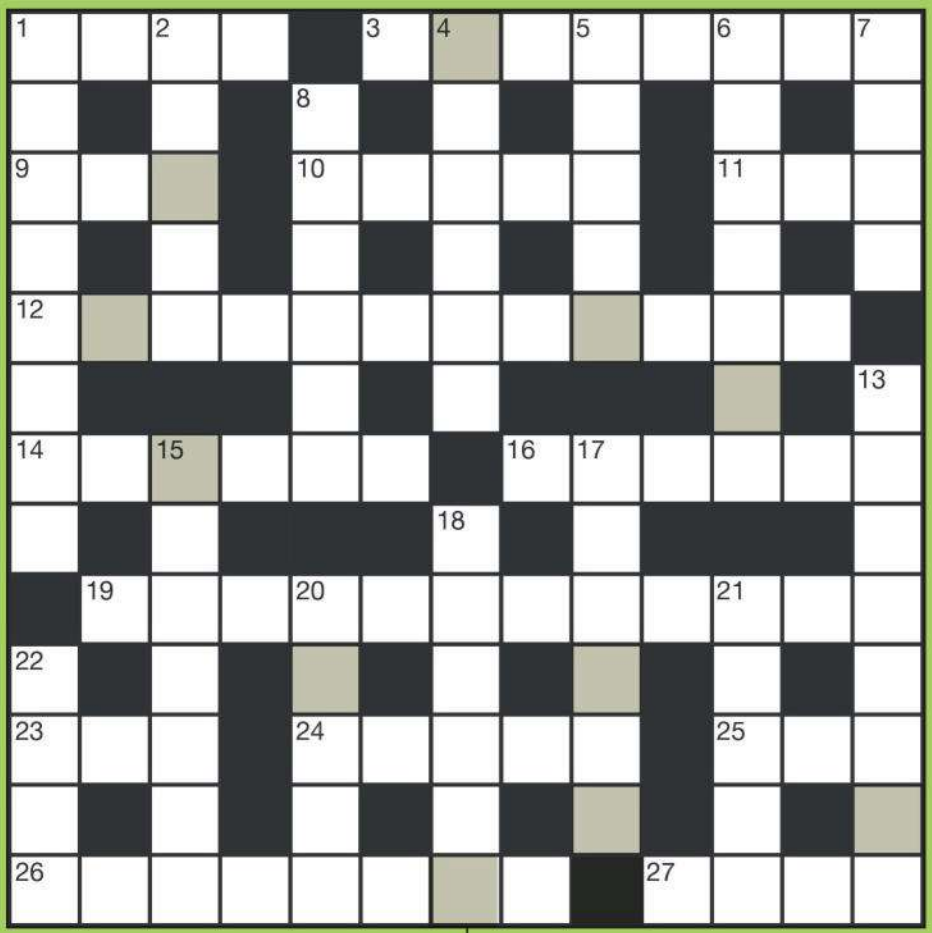
19 John Carpenter wrote the score for *Halloween III*, in association with a long-time collaborator. What is their name?

20 The original Michael Myers mask was a mask of another famous character, with enterprising modifications. Name that character.

ANSWERS 1 *Halloween III: Season Of The Witch* **2** Silver Shamrock **3** Nick Castle **4** Seven: *Halloween* (1978), *Halloween II* (1981), *Halloween H20: 20 Years Later* (1998), *Halloween Resurrection* (2002), *Halloween* (2018), *Halloween Ends* (2022) **5** Scout Taylor-Compton **6** Judith Myers, Michael's older sister (Sandy Johnson) **7** Tommy Doyle, in *Halloween/Halloween II*, *Halloween: The Curse Of Michael Myers*, *Halloween Kills* **8** *Halloween Kills* **9** *Halloween H20: 20 Years Later* **10** Haddonfield **11** Corey Cunningham **12** "The blackest eyes… the Devil's eyes." **13** They play children of Lee Curtis' Laurie Strode **14** *Halloween* (2018) **15** Steve Miner **16** Jamie Lloyd (Danielle Harris) **17** Debra Hill **18** *Halloween Kills* **19** Alan Howarth **20** *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk (William Shatner)

Alamy

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 See **26 Across**
3 *Miller's* — (Coen brothers film) (8)
9 McDiarmid or McShane or McKellen (3)
10 Ed, who voiced Carl Fredricksen in *Up* (5)
11 See **23 Across**
12 He was the Scarlet Pimpernel and Professor Henry Higgins (6,6)
14 Sandler's are funny, DeVito's are ruthless (6)
16 Tarantino presents this Eli Roth horror (6)
19 She's Elphaba Thropp (7,5)
23/11 Across With Fred and Ginger, cheek to cheek (3,3)
24 His name is Waititi (5)
25 It links a Jim Carrey character and the hole of Kirk Douglas (3)
26/1 Across She's played Amy Dunne, Andromeda and Miranda Frost (8,4)
27 This follows heart for a slasher film or snake for Nicolas Cage (4)

DOWN

1 A real-life Tom Hanks captain (8)
2 Three of them from David O. Russell (5)
4 A notorious one with Marlene Dietrich (6)
5 Like the dogs in the title of a controversial Sam Peckinpah thriller (5)
6 — *The Wind* (Spencer Tracy movie) (7)
7 Johnny Depp's was the ninth (4)
8 Henry, who went Solo for Guy Ritchie (6)
13 They appear at the end of *Smokey And The Bandit II* and *Freakier Friday* (8)
15 Butler's first to have fallen! (7)
17 Romantic drama with Anne Hathaway and Jim Sturgess (3,3)
18 Avenger who has the Mind Stone in his head (6)
20 *Magic Mike*'s Channing (5)
21 Country in which *Letters To Juliet* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* are set (5)
22 One is born to be Lady Gaga (4)

COMPETITION

WIN!

MARVEL'S LATEST ON 4K UHD

IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIME! The First Family of Marvel, it's fair to say, had enjoyed — or endured — a somewhat chequered history when it came to cinematic adaptations until the arrival of *Marvel Studios' The Fantastic Four: First Steps* in July. A stylish crowd-pleaser, Matt Shakman's movie was a, well, fantastic addition to the comic-book genre, providing one of the high-points of the summer-blockbuster season. Now it's available to own for your home-viewing pleasure, and we've got four 4K UHD copies to give away. If you fancy getting your hands on one, crack the crossword, solve the anagram and follow the entry instructions below.

***MARVEL STUDIOS' THE FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K ULTRA HD AND 4K ULTRA HD STEELBOOK**

COMPETITION ENDS NOVEMBER 17

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on November 17. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

NOVEMBER'S ANSWERS ACROSS: 1 Perlman **5** Capra **8** Orson **9** *Tangled* **10** Showgirl **11** Dave **13** Ethan **15** Hawke **19** Idea **20** Jennifer **23** *Special* **24** Loach **25** Hoult **26** *Stalker*. **DOWN: 1** Prowse **2** Russo **3** Monaghan **4** *Nature* **5** Cena **6** Pollack **7** Andrea **12** *Magnolia* **14** *The Menu* **16** Hirsch **17** Welles **18** Archer **21** Frank **22** Pitt. **ANAGRAM:** JON M. CHU

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before November 18 or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. Four winners will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winners is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winners will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winners a maximum of three times. If a winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winners' personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winners' details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html

CLASSIC SCENE

"CHESS THING?"

Searching For Bobby Fischer

CHOSEN BY
SIR BEN KINGSLEY
(ACTOR)

Sir Ben Kingsley: "It's a film that I'm in, but I'm not in the scene. It's Joe Mantegna in *Searching For Bobby Fischer*. He has a line — he's in school talking to his son's teacher and she says 'this chess thing'. And he says, 'This chess thing? My son will be better at this than you will ever be at anything in your entire life.' I love that line. Why does that resonate with me? Fatherhood."

INT. SCHOOL — DAY

Fred Waitzkin (Joe Mantegna) is the father of Josh (Max Pomeranc), a seven-year-old boy who has been revealed as a chess prodigy. Fred and his wife Bonnie (Joan Allen) have gone to Josh's school to meet the teacher (Laura Linney). Josh looks on as they chat to the teacher.

BONNIE: Is Josh falling behind on his school work?

TEACHER: He is. But I'm more concerned about other things. Like his friendships.

BONNIE: There's a problem there?

TEACHER: Er, there could be.

FRED: Well, is there, or isn't there?

TEACHER: Mr Waitzkin, I'm, I'm sure he's very good at this chess thing, but that really isn't the issue.

FRED: Chess thing?

TEACHER: I'm sorry?

FRED: Chess thing.

TEACHER: I'm sure he's very good at it, but it worries me. If I could make an analogy—

As the teacher talks, Fred says "chess thing" to Bonnie again, like he's trying to keep his temper.

TEACHER: If it was like, say, oh, I don't know, cards, pinochle…

FRED: Pinochle!

TEACHER: (*Laughing nervously*) For instance.

FRED: Pinochle…

He walks away.

BONNIE: Fred…

Bonnie goes after Fred, who is getting a cup of coffee. The teacher realises she's made a strategic error.

FRED: Bonnie, she's comparing chess to pinochle. What am I supposed to say to that?

BONNIE: Fred. She's trying to make a point. Maybe we should listen. Vinnie thinks he's spending too much time at it, too.

Fred whirls round at the mention of Vinnie's name.

FRED: Vinnie? Vinnie's a drug addict!

Fred says this bit a little too loud. The kids all stop playing and look at him.

FRED: I'm supposed to listen to his opinion too?

Fred turns round to the teacher.

FRED: I'm sorry, but your analogy is a very bad one. If you wanna make a comparison to something, compare it to something that makes sense. Compare it to math or music or art, because otherwise it belittles him and it and me.

TEACHER: No, I don't mean to belittle you at all—

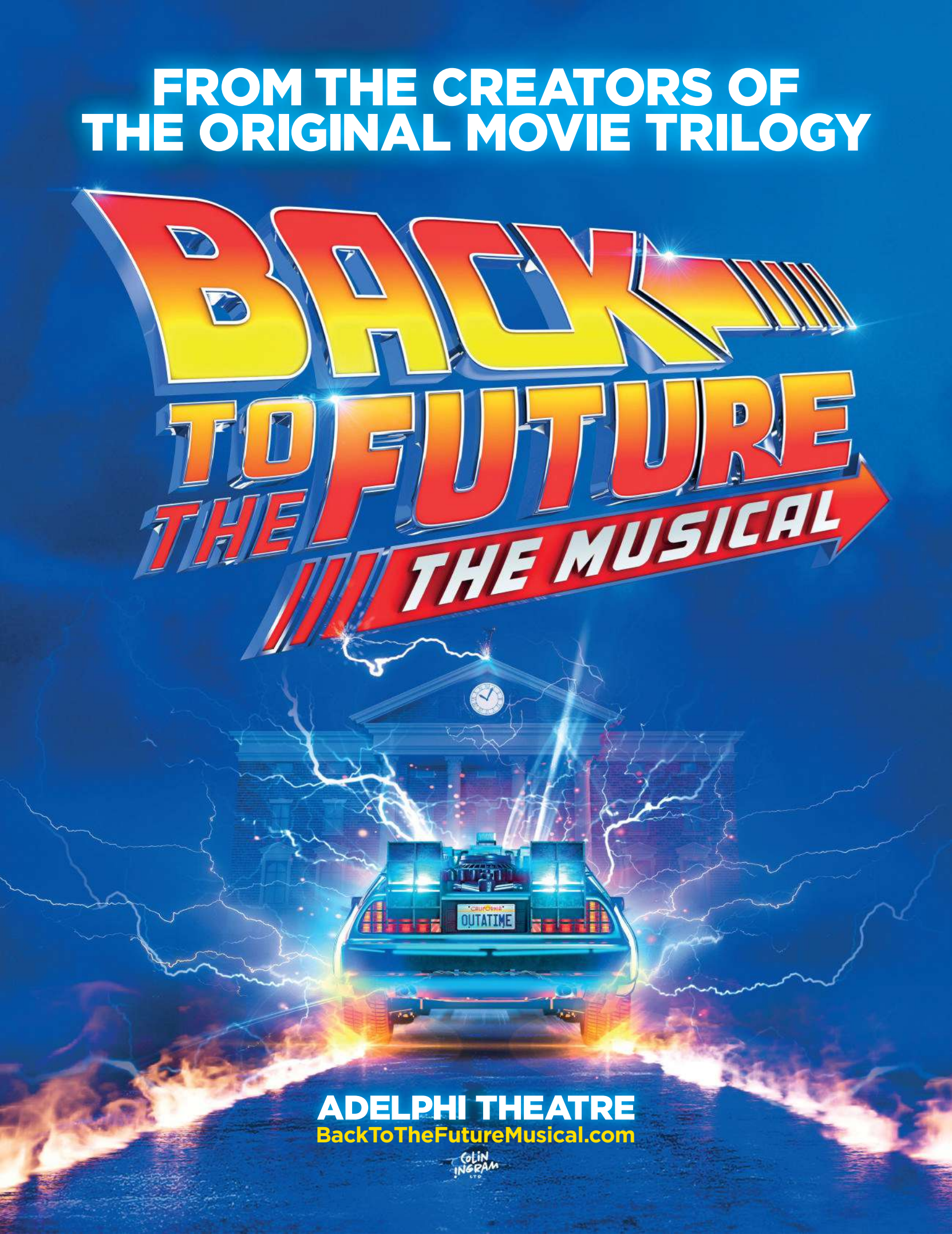
FRED: Oh, but you are. Even the way you're looking at me.

TEACHER: Mr Waitzkin, I think perhaps—

FRED: You wanna know how good he is? I'll, I'll tell you how good he is. He is better at this than I have ever been at anything in my life. He's better at this than you'll ever be at anything. My son has a gift. He has a gift, and once you acknowledge that, then maybe we'll have something to talk about.

FROM THE CREATORS OF
THE ORIGINAL MOVIE TRILOGY

BACK TO THE FUTURE
THE MUSICAL



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